

The Battle of Derna - 1805

BLUF: The Battle of Derna at Derna, in present-day Libya, was a decisive victory in April–May 1805, occurring during the First Barbary Wars. The battle involved a mercenary army recruited and led by William Eaton and Marine Corps 1stLt. Presley O'Bannon. The action included a 521-mile march through the North African desert from Alexandria, Egypt, to the Tripolitan port city of Derna, which was defended by a much larger force of Tripolitan soldiers. It was the first time an American flag was raised above foreign soil in U.S. history after military action.

MAIN CHARACTERS: William Eaton (USN), Hamet Karamanli (Tripolitan), Yusuf Karamanli (Tripolitan), and Presley Neville O'Bannon (USMC).

SETTING THE STAGE: The First Barbary War, which occurred between 1801 and 1805, was the first of two Barbary Wars, in which the U.S. and Sweden fought against the four North African states known collectively as the "Barbary States." Though they were independent states, the principalities technically were provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The U.S. became involved when pirates of the Barbary States seized American merchant ships, holding the crews for ransom. The U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson, refused to pay any tribute. Sweden had been at war with the Tripolitans since 1800 due to similar transgressions. Simultaneously, there was a power struggle between two brothers, Hamet and Yusuf Karamanli, to control Tripoli's throne.

In 1804, the former American Consul to Tunis, William Eaton, returned to the Mediterranean Sea as Naval Agent to the Barbary States. Eaton had been granted permission by the American government to support the claim of Hamet Karamanli. Hamet Karamanli was the rightful heir to Tripoli's throne, according to the U.S. Secretary of State James Madison. Hamet had been deposed by his brother Yusuf and was in exile in Egypt. Eaton sought out Hamet proposing to reinstate him on the throne through military action. Hamet agreed to Eaton's plan, and a mercenary force was assembled.

Three U.S. Navy vessels were sent to the port of Bomba to resupply the force when they arrived. In Alexandria, Egypt, a small detachment of seven U.S. Marines under the command of 1stLt. Presley O'Bannon from the *USS Argus* was assigned to Eaton as part of the U.S. naval contingent. Eaton, O'Bannon, and Hamet recruited over 400 Arab and Greek mercenaries soldiers. Eaton became self-appointed general and commander-in-chief of the combined multinational force, and on 8 March 1805, the liberation force began a 521-mile trek across the Libyan Desert toward Tripolitania.

During the 50-day march, Eaton became concerned about the dwindling supplies and continuing cultural tensions between his Christian Greek and Muslim Turk mercenaries. In Eaton's post-action report, he stated that "*Our only provisions [are] a handful of rice and two biscuits a day.*" Some of the Arabs in the expedition made a desperate attempt to raid the supply wagon but were beaten back by the Marines and a few Greek artillerymen. Mutiny continuously threatened the success of the expedition over the following weeks. Between 10 March and 18 March, numerous Arab camel drivers mutinied, leaving the force weakened due to the lack of pack animals. From 22 March to 30 March, 20 Arab mercenaries under Sheik el Tahib staged another mutiny, forced back in their ranks by the Marines and Greeks. By 8 April, the force crossed the border into Tripoli, and Eaton had quelled the tensions. In late April, his army finally reached the port city of Bomba, on the Gulf of Bomba, where U.S. Navy warships *Argus*, *Nautilus*, and *Hornet* were waiting. Eaton received fresh supplies and moved along the coast toward Derna, which guarded the way to Tripoli's capital city, held by Yusuf Karamanli.

THE STORY: On the morning of 26 April, Eaton sent a letter to Mustafa Bey, the Governor of Derna, asking for safe passage through the city and additional supplies, though Eaton realized the governor probably would not agree. Mustafa reportedly wrote back, "*My head or yours!*". On the morning of 27 April, Eaton observed a fort in Derna with eight guns. The brig *USS Argus* sent a cannon ashore to use in the land attack. All ships opened fire, bombarding Derna's batteries

for an hour. Eaton divided his army into two attack parties. Hamet led the Arab mercenaries southwest to cut Tripoli's main road, then attack the city's left flank. His objective was to storm the weakly defended governor's palace. Eaton, with the rest of the mercenaries and the squad of Marines, attacked the harbor fortress.

The attack began at 1445 hours, with the Marines and Greeks leading the advance. O'Bannon personally commanded four Marines and Greek gunners, who operated the cannon provided by the *Argus*. The assault began when the over-excited Greek gunners left the ramrod in the barrel when it was first fired, preventing the gun from being used again. The Marines and remaining force charged forward despite the lack of cannon support. Eaton's mercenary army was hesitant due to the heavy enemy musket fire that peppered their ranks. He realized a charge was the only way to regain the initiative. Leading the charge, Eaton was wounded in the wrist by a musket ball. O'Bannon, with his Marines and Greeks, "*pass'd through a shower of Musketry from the Walls of houses*" and took possession of the fort's battery. O'Bannon raised the American flag over the battery, and Eaton turned the captured guns on the city. Hamet's force had seized the governor's palace and secured the western part of the city. Many of the defenders of the harbor fortress fled through the town and ran into Hamet's force. By 1600 hours, the entire city had fallen, and for the first time in history, an American flag flew over fortifications on the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean. American casualties were two killed and three wounded during the fighting, while those among the Greek mercenaries were nine total casualties. The exact number of wounded or killed for the Arab mercenaries is unknown, as are those of the defenders.

Yusuf was in the city of Tripoli to the west, aware of the attack, but he was too late to send reinforcements. Yusuf's forces eventually tried to retake Derna on 13 May but were driven off by Eaton's men. On 15 June, Eaton and O'Bannon had reassembled their force and began a march toward Tripoli. Eaton was informed no sooner had the march started that a treaty had been signed on 10 June 1805 between American emissary Tobias Lear and Yusuf Karamanli. The treaty secured U.S. ships and trade at a critical time in America's development. Eaton was enraged by the treaty because it provided a reparation payment to Yusuf Karamanli in exchange for the release of American hostages. Eaton was ordered to escort Hamet and his mercenary force back to Egypt.

AFTERMATH: The battle notably shaped a handful of Marine Corps traditions. Eaton's official report is the first time Marines were referred to as "leathernecks" in writing. The Mameluke sword presented to O'Bannon by Hamet Karamanli eventually became a part of the Marine Corps officer's uniform. This unique sword remains the oldest ceremonial weapon in use by the U.S. Armed Forces today. The Battle of Derna is famously celebrated in the Marines' Hymn, a key verse that reads: "*From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, we fight our country's battles in the air, on land, and sea.*" The U.S. Marine Corps was formally established as a primary protector of American interests overseas.

QUESTIONS

1. Why was the Battle of Derna fought?
2. What role did the Marine Corps play during the event?
3. What traditions and historic firsts occurred during the event?

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