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Washington's Christmas Night Amphibious Gamble

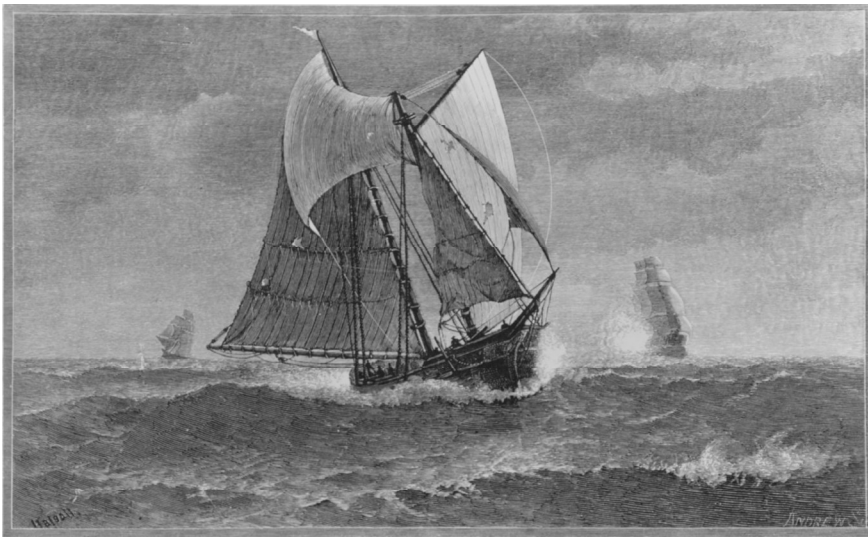
AND HOW A REGIMENT OF YANKEE SAILORS-
TURNED-SOLDIERS PULLED IT OFF

BY JOHN M. DOYLE

On the cold, rainy evening of Dec. 25, 1776, 2,400 ill-clad and ill-fed Continental Army soldiers began loading onto a hodgepodge of watercraft gathered for a risky nighttime crossing of the icy Delaware River from Pennsylvania to New Jersey.

Reeling from a series of losses on the battlefield and facing a shrinking army, a frustrated Continental Congress and an increasingly indifferent citizenry, Gen. George Washington planned a daring night-time raid on a garrison of Hessian mercenaries in the depths of winter to boost patriot morale and salvage the foundering war of independence from Britain.

The story is well known to most Americans, especially if they've seen Emanuel Leutze's iconic 1851 painting, "Washington Crossing the Delaware." Less well known is the remarkable regiment of New England mariners who rowed Washington's troops across the river in a howling snowstorm and played a key role in the victory at Trenton the following morning.



The Hannah was one of the three schooners built by General George Washington for the purpose of intercepting ships with British supplies headed for Boston.

To pull off the risky operation, Washington turned to Col. John Glover, merchant, sea captain and commander of the 14th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the most dependable in the Continental Army. These mariners-turned-soldiers were used to hard work under trying conditions at sea. They followed orders instantly and worked as a team, characteristics prized by Washington, who respected and trusted the tough-as-nails seafarers from the coastal town of Marblehead so much he appointed many to his personal bodyguard unit.

Sailors, Smugglers, Fishermen

Glover's regiment was largely composed of men from Marblehead and other Massachusetts seaports like Beverly, Salem, Danvers and Lynn. In addition to being experienced fishermen in the perilous waters of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, many doubled as merchant seamen on ships crossing the Atlantic to Spain and Portugal with cargoes of codfish and lumber and bringing back fruit, wine, salt and, later, weapons.

Short and feisty, Glover, who at 44 was the same age as Washington, rose from humble beginnings, working his way up from shoemaker to tavern owner to wealthy merchant mariner with his own fleet of fishing schooners.

Like Glover, many of the Marblehead regiment's company commanders were ship captains and ship owners who knew how to manage men in trying

circumstances. Unlike militia units from the backwoods of Pennsylvania and Virginia, the Marblehead regiment included free blacks, Native Americans and Spaniards, who were common sights in New England's seaports. At sea, race wasn't an issue as long as one could obey orders and do the work.

Marblehead was the foremost commercial fishing port in North America, but punitive legislation passed by Parliament barred the New England colonies from fishing in the waters off Newfoundland, strangling the region's main industry. Trade with countries other than Britain and its West Indian colonies also was prohibited. The economic damage

pushed the colonies closer to rebellion. It also turned New England mariners into expert smugglers, dodging Royal Navy ships.

When the Marblehead seamen joined the rebel army outside Boston in summer 1775, there was no U.S. Navy or Marine Corps. However, Washington soon realized he needed ships to intercept British commercial vessels heading for Boston, to seize needed supplies for the Continental Army, especially weapons and gunpowder, while depriving the besieged British of the same. Advised by Glover, who provided one of his own schooners, Washington converted six maritime vessels into warships, often crewed by men from the Marblehead Regiment. It was the first American naval fleet before the Continental Congress acted to create a small fleet of privateers on Oct. 13, 1775.

In the summer of 1776, after the disastrous Battle of Long Island, Glover's men rowed what was left of the Continental Army — cannons, supply wagons and horses included — from Brooklyn Heights, where they were surrounded and facing imminent destruction, across the East River to Manhattan in a single night, without being discovered. Two months later, 800 men under Glover's command held off a 4,000-man British amphibious force trying to cut off Washington's retreat out of New York City.

Christmas Night, 1776

The Continental army was in dire straits just five months after independence was declared: Short of men, food, clothing and morale, with just a half-frozen river between it and destruction. To turn things around, Washington developed a complicated, three-pronged plan for the raid on New Jersey. He would take 2,400 Continental troops across the Delaware at McConkey's ferry about 10 miles upriver from Trenton. The Continentals would march on Trenton, where 1,500 Hessians commanded by Col. Johann Rall were based, and attack before dawn. Another 800 Pennsylvania militiamen were to cross below Trenton and seize a bridge over Assunpink Creek, blocking any Hessian attempt to escape. At the third crossing, farther south at Burlington, New Jersey, 1,200 Philadelphia militiamen and 600 New England Continentals were to delay Hessian and British troops at Bordentown from coming north to help Rall.

Glover's mariners were to take the force across where the river was only about 300 yards wide. The troops would cross in large, double-ended cargo boats used by the Durham Iron Works to transport ore and pig iron. Between 30 and 60 feet long, the boats looked like giant canoes. They had a broad eight-foot beam and a shallow draft of 24 to 30 inches. Flatbottomed ferry boats would transport the horses and artillery pieces.

The complex plan went awry almost immediately. Many of the troops were late getting to their assembly areas. The drizzle turned to rain which turned to snow and then a howling Nor'easter that cut visibility, chilled the men in the boats and whipped up a current that turned ice floes into white torpedoes that banged into the boats. One soldier said, "it blew a perfect hurricane." The mission was three hours behind schedule when the last troops landed in New Jersey around 3 a.m. The forces in the other two prongs of the attack, who had no Marblehead men, were never able to make it across.

Washington's raiding force reached Trenton well after sunrise, but still surprised the Hessians. Contrary to legend, the Hessians weren't drunk or hungover from Christmas merry making. They were just exhausted from frequent skirmishes with New Jersey militia and being on constant alert for an expected attack for days. During the



NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

Col. John Glover, commander of the 14th Massachusetts Regiment.

two-hour battle, Glover's men raced to the Assunpink Creek bridge, killed or drove off the Hessians guarding it, and with cannon and musket fire kept fleeing Hessian troops from escaping. No Americans were killed and only five were wounded, according to the records at the time. The Hessians suffered 22 killed, including Col. Rall, 83 wounded and more than 800 captured.

Glover's exhausted men had to row those prisoners back across the Delaware, along with the rest of the army, when Washington determined it wasn't wise to remain on the Jersey side. The seafarers had to make another crossing a few days later when Washington returned to New Jersey to block a British attempt to retake Trenton on Jan. 2, 1777, while maneuvering to beat the British at Princeton a day later.

By then, the Marblehead men's enlistments were over and they headed home to find work to support their destitute families. Many later joined other regiments or served on the infant Navy's ships or privateers. ■

For more on the Marblehead men, read the main source for this article: "The Indispensables: The Diverse Soldier-Mariners Who Shaped the Country, Formed the Navy, and Rowed Washington Across the Delaware," by Patrick K. O'Donnell, New York, Grove Press, 2022.