

Invasion Force: Tripolitania

Written by Ed Shea

It was not the shirt-and-tie clan of OPEC or the ragamuffin likes of Al Qaeda that provided the first Islamic world attempt to coerce America. Indeed, two hundred years ago, middle-east leaders of various North African regions of Algiers, Morocco, Tunisia and Tripolitania [now Libya] had already acquired a reputation for terrorizing international commerce. Collectively, this motley collection of martinets belonged to what was called the Barbary States and their pirating fleets had been plundering Mediterranean shipping, exacting “protectionist” tribute, taking crew as well as passengers for slaves and ransom as far back as the mid-1600s.



One 19th century journalist summarized the history of the circumstances as follows: “...civilized Europe not only tolerated the robbery, the murder, and the carrying into captivity of her own people, but actually recognized this triple atrocity as a privilege inherent to certain persons of Turkish descent and Islamic religion inhabiting the northern coast of Africa. England or France might have put them down by a word long before; but, as the corsairs chiefly ravaged the defenseless coasts of Sardinia, Sicily, and Naples, the two great powers had no particular interest in crushing them....The English, with large fleets and naval stations in the Mediterranean, had nothing to fear from them, and were, probably, not much displeased with the contributions levied upon the commerce of other nations. Barbary piracy was a protective tax in favor of

British bottoms. French merchantmen kept at home. Spain, Sweden, Denmark, and Holland tried to outbid one another for the favor of [*one titled middle-east martinet or another*], and were robbed and enslaved whenever it suited the interests of their Highnesses. The Portuguese kept out of the Mediterranean, and protected their coast by guarding the Straits of Gibraltar.” All of which suggests that European attitude hasn’t changed in 200 years.

The United States of America, a relatively “new kid on the block,” was to prove less tolerant. For and finally, around 1801, a process began that was to take nearly fifteen years to obtain some measure of control if not an end to the extortion.

Back in *your* 1950s, recruit training lectures on the “History and Traditions of the United States Marine Corps” dealt with this subject in a much abbreviated form. You were provided but “meat and potatoes” of what was a seven course meal and likely as not, to this day, you remember little more about the events of the time than words like *Derne*, phrases such as *Mameluke sword* and “to the shores of Tripoli” or the name of one Marine officer: Lieutenant Presley O’Bannon.

However, there was so much more about the First Barbary Pirate War of real interest. It was to be the first war in which America and its Marine Corps - long before its Army - would fight on foreign soil. It also provided the background for America’s first foray into covert operations, wherein the use of insurgent forces in conjunction with our military was to attempt a coup d’ete. And, almost unbelievably, the successful assault on the northwestern Tripolitan city of *Derne* — now *Dernah*, Libya — was accomplished, discounting insurgents, with an American force of but ten men including: a ne’er do well former United States Consul to Tripoli and court-martialed Army officer, William Eaton; Midshipman George Mann USN; First Lieutenant Presley Neville O’Bannon USMC and seven historically short-shrifted enlisted Marines.² And, finally, the episode provides an extraordinary example for never, EVER, trusting politicians.

In 1800, the ruler of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, seeing what he thought to be American weakness, decided to up the ante for what the mafia would call *protection*. This was a man that had killed one brother, overthrew and exiled another in assuming power. He demanded of President Adams a gift of ten thousand dollars when George Washington died, insisting that it was “customary for *tributary states* to make a gift to the crown of Tripoli, when a great man has passed away.” Then, when getting no response, he raised the demand to a quarter of a million dollars.

The following year, America’s newest President, Thomas Jefferson, seeing that twenty percent of the nation’s annual income was being paid in tribute and ransom to the rascals, decided it was time for change. Though not inclined to military adventures – *it cost too much money* – he ordered half of America’s naval fleet to the Mediterranean as something of a police force and a brazen “showing of the flag.”

Over time and overall, the effort had little effect, spread as it was over 1200 miles of seacoast. Indeed, naval presence provided but still more targets for the pirates. And, on 31Oct03, when the USS Philadelphia ran

aground, its Captain unconscionably surrendered the ship. Its crew of 307 were forthwith shackled and enslaved into building Tripoli's fortifications over the next two years.

Thus it was with fire, brimstone, buckshot and bluster filling the air on both sides that, in 1804, there entered into the equation a 19th century *Jack Bauer*, namely William Eaton, with a proposal for President Jefferson. Simply put: *replace the kleptocratic despot with one of America's own choosing*. Hence, "the die was cast" and by June, with twenty-five thousand dollars, verbal orders and the *unwritten* approval of the Secretary of State James Madison, the now *General* Eaton sailed for the Mediterranean to find the exiled former ruling Pasha of Tripoli, Hamet Karamanli.

Over the next several months, Eaton and his entourage ranged from Alexandria to Cairo seeking an audience with the understandably paranoid man he would make *king*. It was December before secret contact was made at the Fayyum Oasis some two hundred miles inland at the edge of the Barca desert. Eaton laid out his plans for taking the northeastern city of Derne, moving on to the taking of the 700 mile distant *city* of Tripoli on the northwest coast and ensconcing Hamet upon the throne.

Though more than a little suspicious of both Eaton's and America's intentions, Hamet Karamanli agreed to the attempt and the two men began to put together a force of perhaps six-hundred. And, a more *democratic* lot never existed: a formidable mix of Arabs, Levantine brigands, 38 Greek and other European mercenaries, sheiks, Christians and Muslims, rogues and scoundrels all. It wasn't until 8Mar05 that this *Extraordinary* Expeditionary Unit [EEU] set off from Alexandria, Egypt on an exhaustive six week five hundred mile trek across the deserts of the northern coastline.

Despite interference from Turkish cavalry and the French Consul; sandstorms of the khamsin wind bringing noontime darkness; two near mutinies born of Christian-Muslim distrust; various intra-group rivalries as well as a shortage of rations, money and patience; they finally encamped atop a hill overlooking Derne on 25Apr1805. Eaton ordered a reconnaissance and learned that the garrison contained "800 defenders, one 10 inch Howitzer and eight nine-pounders" facing seaward and useless against a land attack. On the 26th, he asked Derne's Governor to surrender, was threatened with death for his overture and, then, prepared for the attack.

At 0600 of the 27th, three American vessels [Argus, Nautilus and Hornet] anchored within one-hundred yards of the nine-pounders and swiftly put them to rest. At the same time, Hamet with his insurgent *stew* attacked the town and Eaton, with his smaller force, the fortress. As part of the latter's endeavor, Lieutenant O'Bannon with his Marines, a few Greeks and cannoniers passed through a shower of musketry, took the stronghold, raised the U.S. flag above its ramparts and directed concentrated fire on the enemy below. After two hours of hand-to-hand, Derne had fallen at the cost of fourteen lives, two of them Marines. Eaton had taken a round in the wrist.

Over the next few weeks various counterattacks failed and by 28May the joint task force had driven all resistance from the city. It was all over, except for the anticipated seven hundred mile march to the city of Tripoli and the hoped for defeat of Yusuf. Or, so it was thought.

To Eaton's chagrin, there had been a bit of duplicity afoot. All the while he and all had risked life and limb on behalf of what he thought was U.S. policy, Secretary of State James Madison had been directing one Tobias Lear, as Consul-General, to negotiate with the waffling flotsam and potentially near vanquished Yusuf in Tripoli. On 11Jun05, Eaton learned that "peace had been reached." Yusuf was to remain in power, Hamet was forever OUT. Except for the threat value provided at the bargaining table, all efforts and deaths had been for nothing.

Hamet was now but a *beggar* swept off to Malta, with a piddling State Department pension. Even his family was denied to him for a period of four years thereafter, as specifically required in the pathetic *peace* agreement. His paranoia had proven well founded. Taken up as a convenience, he'd been discarded with prejudice.

Eaton returned to the United States and died 11 years later, still angry and quite broke. O'Bannon, with the his acclaimed blade of Damascus, the renowned Mameluke sword provided as a gift from Hamet, resigned from the Corps on 12Sep07 and spent the rest of his days in Kentucky, dying at the age of 74 on 12Sep50. His remains and a memorial are to be found in Frankfurt, Kentucky in commemoration of his service on the

“shores of Tripoli” and establishing standards reflecting “the best traditions of the Marine Corps” with an invasion force a far cry from one of today.

Footnotes:

¹The Atlantic Monthly, Volume VI, December 1860, number XXXVI.

²After much research, the identity of only one was obtained, an NCO with the wonderful sounding name of Pascal Paoli Peck.

Further reading: “The Pirate Coast: Thomas Jefferson, The First Marines and the Secret Mission of 1805,” by Richard Zacks. Published by Hyperion; copyright May 2005.

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