

MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES



Loyal Legion Vignettes

JOHN BROWN AT HARPERS FERRY: MARINES ANSWER THE CALL

By
Kevin P. Gallen
(April 2003)

On the morning of October 17, 1859, panic gripped Washington D.C. as word reached the Capital that John Brown of Kansas and a group of armed abolitionists seized the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia and kidnapped several prominent citizens of the town. By noon, President James Buchanan had verified the facts of the situation and took action. Troops from the Maryland and Virginia Militia were summoned to Harpers Ferry but the President wanted Federal troops to handle this situation. Accordingly, the 3rd US. Army Artillery Regiment at Fort Monroe was alerted, however it soon became clear that army troops could not arrive on the scene for two days. Instead, Marines stationed at Marine Barracks Washington were pressed into service. By 3:20 PM, a detachment of 86 marines commanded by 1st Lt. Israel Greene, U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) boarded a train bound for Harpers Ferry. Greene was assisted by Major William Russell, USMC Paymaster of the Corps, who was sent to advise the young officer.

Secretary of War John Floyd had other ideas regarding the overall commander of the operation. Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee, U.S. Army, was on leave in nearby Arlington, Virginia preparing to report to the 2nd U.S. Cavalry in Texas. Orders were sent by courier to Colonel Lee. The courier was Lt. James E.B. Stuart who was waiting to meet with the Secretary of War. Stuart offered his services to Lee as aide de camp and the two headed for the War Department.

As the Marines hit the rails to danger, the situation in Harpers Ferry rapidly deteriorated. The Jefferson County Militia exchanged gunfire with Brown's band and two failed assaults on the engine house resulted in heavy casualties. The abolitionists killed Fontaine Beckham, the Mayor of Harpers Ferry, and the militia captured and killed William Thompson, one of Brown's men.

The Marine detachment arrived at the Sandy Hook station near Harpers Ferry by 9:30 pm. Later in the evening they were joined by Colonel Lee and Lt. Stuart. By dawn on October 18th 1859, Lee, Stuart, and Greene approached the arsenal and the compound was surrounded by Maryland and Virginia Militia. Believing this to be a state matter, Lee offered both the Maryland and Virginia Militia the honor of storming the engine house where a dozen of Brown men and hostages were. Both commanders declined and Colonel Lee turned Lt. Greene and his Marines.

Lt. Stuart was sent to make a surrender demand to John Brown. If it was rejected, he was to wave his hat as a signal. A force of 12 marines with sledgehammers would be sent to make an entry into the engine house. Stuart made his demand and John Brown made counter demands over the yelling and screaming of the hostages. The young cavalry officer lost patience with the situation and waved his hat. Two large marines with sledgehammers tried in vain to open the heavy doors to the engine house. Greene saw a large ladder lying near by and ordered 5 marines on each side of the ladder to ram the door. The door opened on the second attempt and Lt. Greene and Major Russell leaped through the breach followed by Marines with bayonets. The inside of the engine house was covered in smoke. Lewis Washington, grand nephew of George Washington, assisted Greene in locating John Brown who was preparing to fire a rifle. Lt. Greene struck Brown on the back of his neck with his sword and then thrust it into Brown's side. The abolitionist would have died on the spot if Greene had been wearing a regulation sword, however in his haste, Israel Greene had brought his light dress sword which was not as deadly. Two of Brown's men, Jeremiah Anderson and Dauphin Thompson, fell beneath marine bayonets. Marine Pvt. Luke Quinn made the ultimate sacrifice while Pvt. Mathew Ruppert was received a gunshot wound to the face. The entire conflict took less than three minutes.

Israel Greene and his Marines assisted Colonel Lee in searching for more of Brown's men in the surrounding countryside. The Marine detachment was back in its barracks on the morning of October 20th. Lt. Colonel Robert E. Lee wrote a letter to Marine Commandant Harris praising the action of the Marines at Harpers Ferry.

History well documents what happened to Robert E. Lee and Jeb Stuart in the coming years but it is interesting to note that Israel Greene left the USMC to become a Captain in the Confederate Marine Corps.

The Marine action at Harpers Ferry was more than an interesting footnote to history. Lt. Greene and his detachment were a rapid deployment team sent into a hostile situation. This may have been the first time U.S. Marines were used in this capacity but it certainly was not the last. It would be a pattern seen throughout the 20th and into the 21st century.

Source:

Sullivan, D.M. *The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War- The First Year.*

Note:

Kevin Gallen is Chairman of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources Advisory Committee on Civil War Markers and a member of the William T. Sherman/Billy Yank Camp 65, Department of Missouri, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War.

