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MARINE CORPS HISTORICAL REFERENCE SERIES  
NO. 10

THE UNITED STATES MARINES  
AT  
HARPER'S FERRY, 1859

Historical Branch, G-3 Division  
Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps  
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<SIGNATURE>  
H. W. BUSE, JR.  
Brigadier General, U. S. Marine Corps  
Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3

THE UNITED STATES MARINES  
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"AT ALL TIMES READY ...;"

THE MARINES AT HARPER'S FERRY

By

Bernard C. Nalty

"I must also ask to express...my entire commendation of the conduct of the detachment of Marines, who were at all times ready and prompt in the execution of any duty."

Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee  
from his report to the Adjutant General of  
the suppression of John Brown's Raid.

James Ewell Brown Stuart, First Lieutenant, U. S. Cavalry, was enjoying six months' leave from his frontier post at Fort Riley, Kansas Territory. Yet, the joys of coming home to Virginia had not made him forget that he was a cavalryman by profession. On the rainy morning of 17 October 1859 he had ridden over the muddy streets of Washington to the office of the War Department, and now he sat waiting to speak with Secretary of War John B. Floyd. Jeb Stuart had an idea for a new type strap to fasten a cavalryman's sabre to his belt. While the young lieutenant was rehearsing in his mind for the coming interview, the Secretary himself was face to face with the spectre of a slave insurrection.<1>

John B. Floyd was a poor administrator, a failing which almost resulted in his removal from office;<2> but on this day there was no need for paper shuffling. Word had come by way of Baltimore that an insurrection had broken out at Harper's Ferry. A band of armed men had captured the United States arsenal there and was fermenting a slave rebellion. A native of Virginia, the Secretary most have heard the oft-told tales of the Haitians revolt against their French masters with all its barbarism. Nor had any son of the Old Dominion forgotten Nat Turner's Rebellion, a slave uprising which occurred a generation before and claimed the lives of 55 whites in a single bloody night.<3>

Swinging at once into action, Floyd fired off a telegram to Fort Monroe; and by noon Captain Edward O. C. Ord with 150 coast artillerymen was on his way toward Baltimore on the

first leg of the journey to Harper's Ferry.<4> There was no question as to who would command operations against the insurgents. Floyd called for his chief clerk and set him to writing orders summoning to the War Department Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee, then on leave at his estate, Arlington, just across the Potomac from the Capital.

Message in hand, the harassed aide came dashing out of the office, only to halt when he spied the forgotten cavalry officer. Stuart, by now thoroughly bored, was easily persuaded to deliver the sealed envelope. Even as this message was speeding toward its destination, President James Buchanan called upon Secretary Floyd to move even faster a demand which was to bring the Marine Corps into the picture.<5>

Since there were no troops nearer the scene of the uprising than those en route from Fort Monroe, Floyd was powerless to comply; but Secretary of the Navy Isaac Toucey quickly offered a solution to his dilemma. About noon Charles W. Welsh, chief clerk of the Navy Department, came riding through the main gate of the Washington Navy Yard. He sought out First Lieutenant Israel Greene, temporarily in command of Marine Barracks, Washington, and asked how many Leathernecks were available for duty. Greene estimated that he could round up some 90 men from both his barracks and the small Navy Yard detachment. He then asked Welsh what was wrong. The civilian told him all he knew--that the armory at Harper's Ferry had been seized by a group of abolitionists and that state and federal troops already were on the march.<6>

Mr. Welsh reported back to the Navy Department, and Secretary Toucey at once began drafting an order to John Harris, Colonel Commandant of the Corps. "Send all the available marines at Head Quarters," he wrote, "under charge of suitable officers, by this evening's train of cars to Harper's Ferry to protect the public property at that place, which is endangered by a riotous outbreak." Once they arrived at their destination, the Leathernecks would be under the command of the senior Army officer present,<7> in this case Colonel Lee.

As the senior line officer on duty at the Navy Yard, Israel Greene assumed the burden of organizing the expedition. Major William W. Russell, Paymaster of the Corps, was detailed to assist him; but Russell, a staff officer, could not exercise command over the force. Colonel Harris felt that the presence of a more mature person--Greene, after all, had only a dozen years' service to his credit--might prevent unnecessary bloodshed.<8> Working with the major, Greene saw to it that each of his 86 men had drawn musket, ball cartridges,

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and rations. Since no one knew for certain the strength or exact position of the insurgent force, two 3-inch howitzers and a number of shrapnel shells were made ready. At 1530, the Leathernecks clambered aboard a Baltimore and Ohio train and rattled off toward Harper's Ferry.<9>

While Secretary Toucey was busy alerting the Marines, Jeb Stuart had returned from Arlington with Colonel Lee. Once again the lieutenant waited in the Secretary's anteroom as Floyd outlined the crisis to Lee. There was no need to stress the savage implications of a slave uprising; for the colonel had been stationed at Fort Monroe when Nat Turner had put aside his hoe to take up the sword, and he well remembered the terror that followed. He

recalled, too, how militia, regulars, and Marines from Norfolk had scoured the Virginia countryside before bringing Turner to bay deep in the vastness of Dismal Swamp. After receiving the latest intelligence from western Virginia, Lee was handed orders placing him in overall command of the effort to suppress the insurrection.<10>

Accompanied by Stuart, Floyd and Lee hurried to the White House where the colonel was given a proclamation of martial law to issue if he should see fit. In addition to the proclamation, Lee acquired an aide. Certain that a fight of some sort was at hand, Stuart volunteered to accompany him to Harper's Ferry, and Lee accepted. Still in civilian clothes, the colonel hurried to the railroad station, but the Marines already had left.<11>

The next train to leave the national capital was the Baltimore express. At 1700 Lee and Stuart boarded the train in the hope of catching up with the column at Relay House, a station near Baltimore where the troops had to change trains. They were too late, and the expedition rolled off toward its goal without its commanding officer. Lee then wired the stationmaster at Sandy Hook, Maryland, to hold the trainload of Leathernecks until he and his aide arrived. For the time being, all the two officers could do was wait.

Fortunately they were not delayed for long. John W. Garrett, president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, learned of Lee's plight and ordered a locomotive to Relay House. Aware that a few moments wasted might cost him his job, the engineer opened wide the throttle. At 2200 Lee arrived at Sandy Hook, on the Maryland side of the Potomac across the bridge from Harper's Ferry. Major Russell and Lieutenant Greene were waiting as the Army officers descended from the cab.<12> Lee now learned the details of the insurrection.

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It had happened so quickly. On the night of 16 October, at about 2230, 18 armed men led by a farmer who called himself Isaac Smith--some said he was "Old Osawatomie," John Brown of Kansas--padded across the covered, wooden railroad trestle leading into the town and made a prisoner of one of the bridge tenders. Next the raiders had strolled undetected through the darkness of the gates of the United States armory. They leveled their pistols at a startled watchman and quickly gained access to the buildings.

The leader of the band then sent out patrols to take hostages. Most prominent among the captives was Lewis W. Washington, a colonel on the staff of Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia and the great-grandnephew of George Washington. His captors forced him to hand over to them a sword given the first President by Frederick the Great of Prussia.<13> During the nightmare that followed, this sword hung at the side of the man called Smith.

While the prisoners were being rounded up, the second bridge tender, Patrick Higgins, wandered out onto the span in search of his partner. In the darkness he collided with two of the raiders who had been posted as guards. A single punch floored one of them, and as the other fired wildly, Higgins sprinted back to town. The angry, red crease etched lightly across his scalp by a rifle bullet was proof enough that Harper's Ferry was under attack.

The raiders next showed their hand when the eastbound night express neared Harper's Ferry. Afraid that the bridge had been weakened, a railroad employee flagged the train to a halt short of the trestle. A party of trainmen walked out onto the span to investigate but were driven back by a

volley of rifle fire. Mortally wounded by the self-appointed liberators was Shephard Hayward, a freed slave. Until dawn the raiders held the train at Harper's Ferry. Then the locomotive gingerly eased its cars across the bridge, gathered momentum, and roared off toward Frederick City, Maryland. There it halted while the conductor wired a garbled report of the insurrection to the railroad's main office in Baltimore. This news was relayed to the governors of Maryland and Virginia; militiamen were alerted and sent marching toward the embattled town. Next a telegram was dispatched to the Secretary of War, and now, at last, Colonel Lee and the Marines had arrived on the scene.<14>

To the colonel's experienced eye the situation did not appear critical. Harper's Ferry swarmed with militia; and although the state troops were disorganized, ill-trained, some of them drunk, there were enough of them to prevent the

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raiders escaping into the hills. Nor was there any point in posting the proclamation of martial law. There were too few federal troops to patrol the streets, and the citizen soldiers who would have to assist them were perhaps the least orderly group in town.

Since the situation was fairly well in hand, Colonel Lee hurried off a wire informing Captain Ord that his artillerymen turned infantry, would not be needed at Harper's Ferry. They were to halt at Fort McHenry in Baltimore.<15>

Learning that the militiamen, whatever their faults, had at least forced the insurgents to barricade themselves in a single small building on the armory grounds--the Engine House--Lee decided to attack as quickly as possible. Because of the danger to the hostages, a night assault was out of the question, so the colonel, his aide, and the Marines crossed the river to await the dawn.<16>

About 2300 on the night of 17 October, Greene led his men across the covered bridge and into the armory yard to relieve the militia posted around the raider bastion. The insurgents had taken refuge in a stone building, about 30 by 35 feet, which housed the armory's fire fighting equipment. Three entrances, each separated from its neighbor by a stone abutment, pierced the front of the structure. Two of these were guarded by heavy, nail studded, double doors, while on their left was an equally strong single door.<17> To assault a band of determined men, frontier guerrillas who had proven themselves to be deadly marksmen, would not be an easy task.

As the Marines moved out, Lee was busy laying his plans. First he drafted a surrender ultimatum addressed to the person in command of the insurgents--Lee was not yet certain that Brown was leading the raid--to be delivered by Lieutenant Stuart at the colonel's order. Should the raiders refuse unconditional surrender, there would be no bargaining with them. At a signal from Stuart, the assault party would batter down a door and pounce on the enemy with bayonet and rifle butt. There could be no shooting because of the danger to the hostages.<18>

Selecting men to make the assault posed a touchy problem in federal-state relationships. Since the uprising was directed mainly against the slave states, even though federal property was involved, Lee offered the honor of spearheading the attack to the militia. The officer in charge of Maryland troops, who maintained that his only mission was to protect the townspeople, declined. He could see no reason for sacri-

ficing Maryland lives to avenge an insult to a sister state; besides, Marines were paid for this kind of work. Nor was the Virginia militia colonel eager to erase the stain of insurrection from the honor of the Old Dominion; let the "mercenaries," as he called the Marines, do the job. The veteran Army officer, still clad in civilian clothes, then turned to Israel Greene, splendid in his dress uniform. Would the Marines storm the engine house? Greene whipped off his cap and accepted with thanks.<19>

At about 0630 Greene received his instructions. Twelve men were to form the storming party, with an equal number in reserve. In addition, a detail of three men, each of whom had been issued a heavy sledge hammer,<20> was to accompany the assault party and batter down the center doors of the engine house. Twenty-seven Marines, with Greene and Russell at their head, gathered close to the engine house but out of the insurgent's line of fire to await Stuarts signal.

Two thousand pairs of eyes were fixed on Jeb Stuart as he strode, bearing a flag of truce, toward the engine house to deliver Lee's ultimatum. Tensely the throng of spectators waited for the drama to unfold. Standing on a small rise in front of the makeshift fort was Robert E. Lee, looking every inch an officer in spite of his grimy clothing and tired face. Near him, dressed as though for parade, were the blue-clad Marines.

Now Stuart halted before the building and called for "Mr. Smith." The center doors opened a few inches. There, carbine in hand, stood the lean, fierce figure of old John Brown, the anti-slavery zealot who had caused so much bloodshed on the banks of Osawatomie Creek in Kansas. Stuart recognized him at once.

The lieutenant repeated Lee's demand for immediate surrender, but Brown tried desperately to bargain. From inside the building came the cries of the hostages, pleading that Lee cooperate with their captor. Satisfied that Brown would not listen to reason, Stuart spun aside, pressed his back against the abutment, and waved his hat, that gaudily plumed chapeau which would become his trademark during the Civil War.<21>

Instantly the Marines sprang to the assault. Three of them flailed away with their sledge hammers; but the center doors, now slammed and bolted, held fast. Inside, Brown removed the historic sword from his belt, placed it reverently upon one of the fire carts, then joined the four raiders yet unwounded in trying to beat back the assault. From within the building came

the bold words of Lewis Washington. "Don't mind us," he shouted. "Fire!" Lee recognized the voice. "The old revolutionary blood does tell," was his quiet comment.<22>

Suddenly the thudding hammers stopped. During the charge, Green had seen a ladder lying near the engine house. Now he ordered his men to snatch it up to use as a battering ram. Its second blow splintered the door, and the

Leathernecks came spilling into the building just as Brown was reloading his weapon.<23>

Armed only with his light dress sword, Greene jumped from the cover of the abutment and bounded through the opening. Behind him came Major Russell, weaponless but brandishing a rattan switch. The darkened interior rocked to the echoing shots. The third Marine to scramble through the shattered door, Private Luke Quinn, took a fatal bullet in his abdomen. The fourth man, Private Mathew Ruppert, was slightly wounded in the face;<24> but these casualties could not stem the blue-clad tide.

The first figure to rise from the gloom as Greene rushed forward was that of Lewis Washington, an old friend. The Virginia aristocrat strode up to the officer, warmly took his left hand, then, pointing to a bearded man fumbling with a carbine, said, "This is Osawatomie." With all his strength Greene slashed at Brown with his sword. The first blow left a deep cut across the back of his neck; but the frail blade bent double on Brown's ammunition belt when Greene thrust at his heart, and John Brown was spared for the hangman.<25>

In a moment the engine house was filled with wildly charging Marines. A sniper posted under one of the engines was bayoneted to death; sharpened steel pinned a second raider to the wall. Greene then called a halt to the onslaught as the two unwounded raiders surrendered.<26>

Three minutes of fierce action had ended a 32-hour reign of terror. None of the hostages was harmed, but the Marines suffered two men wounded, one of them fatally. Brown, his wounded and semi-conscious son, and four able-bodied riflemen had defended the engine house. Of these, two were killed, Brown himself was wounded, and the others taken prisoner.<27>

All that remained was to deliver the prisoners to the jail at Charlestown, a journey which proved uneventful. Upon their return to Harper's Ferry, rumors of a new uprising, this one at the village of Pleasant Valley, Maryland, greeted the Marines. Lee, Stuart, Greene, and 25 men marched the 5 miles

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to this sleepy hamlet on the night of 19 October, but, as the colonel expected, all was calm.<28>

The slave uprising had not materialized. The pikes with which John Brown had hoped to arm the rebels were never issued. Yet, the raid on Harper's Ferry, this ill-planned, poorly executed attempt to free men in bondage, hastened "the inevitable conflict."

In this conflict the four officers who took part in Brown's capture were to find themselves sorely tried in spirit and body. Only Major Russell was to remain with the Union, dying in office as Paymaster of the United States Marine Corps in October 1862.<29> The exploits of Lee and Stuart are too well known to recount. Israel Greene, literally the Sword of the Union at Harper's Ferry, also joined the Confederate cause.

A New Yorker by birth, a Wisconsinite by rearing, a Virginian by marriage, and a Marine by profession, Greene's services were much sought after when the time came to choose up sides in 1861. Declining appointment both as

a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia infantry and as colonel in the Wisconsin militia, Greene accepted a captaincy in the fledgling Confederate States Marine Corps. As a major and Adjutant and Inspector of the Corps he served throughout the war at Confederate Marine headquarters in Richmond until his capture and parole at Farmville, Virginia, in April 1865. Returning to the west, Greene settled in Mitchell, South Dakota, where he died in 1909, 50 years after his moment in the glaring spotlight of history at Harper's Ferry--a visible symbol of the great struggle that tore the nation asunder and put it back together again.<30>

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#### NOTES

1. John W. Thomason, Jr., "Jeb Stuart" (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 47; Allan Keller, "Thunder at Harper's Ferry" (Englewood, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958), p. 66.
2. Keller, op. cit., p. 67; James E. Walmsley, "Floyd, John Buchanan," "Dictionary of American Biography" (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), v. 6, pp. 482-483.
3. Harvey Wish, "Nat Turner's Rebellion," "Dictionary of American History" (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), v. 4, p. 56.
4. A. Eric Bubeck, "Colonel Lee and the Marines at Harper's Ferry," "Marine Corps Gazette," v. 33, no. 12 (Dec 1949), p. 51; Douglas Southall Freeman, "R. E. Lee; A Biography" (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), v. 1. p. 396.
5. Thomason, op. cit., p. 47.
6. Israel Green [sic], "The Capture of John Brown," "North American Review," v. 141, no. 6 (Dec 1885), p. 564.
7. Toucey to Harris, 17 Oct 1859, copy in Subject File: HARPER'S FERRY, (Historical Branch, Headquarters, USMC).
8. Toucey to Russell, 5 Nov 1859, "Officer of the Marine Corps," v. 6, Records Group 80, National Archives.
9. Toucey to Harris, "loc. cit." Green, op. cit., p. 564; muster rolls, MB, Navy Yard Yard, Washington, and MB, Washington.
10. Freeman, op. cit., v. 1, pp. 394-395; Keller, op. cit., pp. 53-54.
11. Keller, op. cit., pp. 68-69; Freeman, op. cit., v. 1, pp. 394-395.
12. Keller, op. cit., pp. 98, 125.
13. Testimony of Colonel Lewis Washington in U. S. Congress, Senate, "Senate Committee Report No. 278, 1st Session, 36th Congress."
14. Keller, op. cit., pp. 37-44.

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15. Lee to Ord, telegram, 18 Oct 1859, "Suppression of John Brown's Raid," Records Group 94, National Archives.
16. Freeman, op. cit., v. 1. p. 396; Keller, op. cit., pp. 125-126; Lee to the Adjutant General in "Senate Committee Report," op. cit.
17. Green, op. cit., pp. 564-565; contemporary sketches and a photograph of the engine house taken shortly after the Civil War.
18. Freeman, op. cit., v. 1. pp. 396-397.
19. Ibid., p. 398.
20. Keller, op. cit., p. 147; Lee to Adjutant General, loc. cit.
21. J. E. B. Stuart to his mother, 31 Jan 1860, copy in Biography File: STUART, J. E. B., Historical Branch, Headquarters, USMC; Green, op. cit., pp. 565-566.
22. Freeman, op. cit., v. 1. p. 399; Keller, op. cit., p. 149.
23. Green, op. cit., pp. 566-567.
24. Appendix C, Lee to Adjutant General, 19 Oct 1859, "Suppression of John Brown's Raid," Records Group 94, National Archives; muster rolls, MB, Washington and MB, Navy Yard, Washington.
25. Green, op. cit., pp. 566-567.
26. Ibid.
27. Keller, op. cit., pp. 150-151.
28. Lee to Adjutant General, loc. cit.; Freeman, op. cit., v. 1, p. 401. The following year another rumor--that Greene was to receive a sword from a grateful Virginia legislature--enraged Stuart. The latter felt that he, a volunteer, should share in any honors given Greene who was, after all, acting under orders.
29. Biography File: RUSSELL, William Worthington, Historical Branch, Headquarters, USMC.
30. Ibid., GREENE, Israel.