

Marines Make Do

(Marines on the Shores of Tripoli)

As the 18th century drew to a close, the fledgling United States government was still struggling to find its way. Heavily in debt after the Revolutionary War and the Louisiana Purchase, the government had disbanded the Navy. During this time, the Barbary Corsairs (pirates) from northern Africa regularly disrupted trade in the Mediterranean by capturing ships, stealing cargo and taking those on board to be sold as slaves or ransomed. Other nations simply paid a tribute to the Barbary rulers in exchange for safe passage of all ships under their flag. When the United States refused to pay such a tribute, _____, ruler of Tripoli, declared war on the United States. In response, the USS Philadelphia was sent to blockade the harbor and confront the pirates. When the ship ran aground on an uncharted reef, however, the crew was taken captive to be ransomed by the pirates.

These events provoked Thomas Jefferson and congress to take further military action against the pirates. Six Navy frigates were commissioned and sent to challenge the pirates. As part of this effort, Jefferson also sent William Eaton and 8 US Marines on an expedition to gain support to overthrow the Barbary ruler. The Marine Corps involvement in the United States “first war on terror,” would eventually become a legendary part of its history, with a reference to it in the Marine Hymn (“...to the shores of Tripoli”). However, the whole story of the expedition is an incredible journey of overcoming one misfortune after another. The expedition was underfunded and had little solid support from Navy leaders and leaders in Washington. The small band of Americans had to unite a group of fractured tribes and mercenaries in support of a weak local leader, and then raise an army despite tribal feuds and ongoing wars in the area, and travel across the desert to attack a much larger and better defended force. The journey across the desert was fraught with severe hunger and thirst, and constant threat of betrayal and theft. One American later wrote: “When I think on our situation in the desert, where no other [American] ever set his foot...I frequently wonder how it was possible for us to succeed. . . . Certainly it was one of the most extraordinary expeditions ever set on foot. We were frequently 24 hours without water, and once 47 hours without a drop. Our horses were sometimes three days without, and for the 20 days had nothing to eat, except what they picked out of the sand.”

At one point, the allied Muslim troops, fearing that the Americans and their allied mercenary armies were preparing to betray them (they were actually just performing drills), charged. Despite a charging horde, hot tempers and dozens of muskets pointed at their chests, the Americans maintained composure. Marine Lieutenant Presley O’Bannon stood firm, smiling at the threatening horde in order to calm them. Because of his composure tragedy was avoided and the two distrusting armies again pressed forward together.

Later, the fractured allies faced the task of attacking Derna, which was held by a greater force who had established defensive positions. The 8 Marines led the charge against the entrenched army with such fury that they drove the enemy from the city.



The Message

All too often, life doesn't cooperate with our grand plans. Murphy's Law seems at time to have more influence than the law of gravity. We may be underfunded, unsupported and misunderstood. Perhaps our fortunes have taken a turn for the worse, either through our own bad choices, the actions of others, or as a cruel trick of nature. There are times when it seems that we haven't been dealt a fair hand. In such times, it would be easy to turn away from your goals. It would be understandable to say, "How can anyone succeed under such unfavorable circumstances?" Surely nobody would blame us for throwing in the towel.

In the face of such recurring misfortune in Tripoli, what did Lieutenant O'Bannon do? He played his fiddle and pushed forward. He smiled at the charging enemy, and he ignored the odds and charged a greater force because it had to be done. He made do with less than ideal circumstances. That is what Marines do. So when you are tempted to think that life is unfair, or are frustrated because things aren't going the way you want them to, remember the Marines in Tripoli. Rather than wasting time lamenting poor luck and focusing on how things have not turned out as planned, accept the realities of the battlefield you fight and then make do with what you have.