

= Battle of Nassau =

The Battle of Nassau (March 3 ? 4 , 1776) was a naval action and amphibious assault by American forces against the British port of Nassau , Bahamas , during the American Revolutionary War (also known as the American War of Independence) . It is considered the first cruise and one of the first engagements of the newly established Continental Navy and the Continental Marines , the progenitors of the United States Navy and Marine Corps . The action was also the marines ' first amphibious landing . It is sometimes known as the " Raid of Nassau " .

Departing from Cape Henlopen , Delaware , on February 17 , 1776 , the fleet arrived in the Bahamas on March 1 , with the objective of seizing gunpowder and munitions that were known to be stored there . Two days later the marines went ashore and seized Fort Montagu at the eastern end of the Nassau harbor but did not advance to the town , where the gunpowder was stored . That night , Nassau 's governor had most of the gunpowder loaded aboard ships that then sailed for St. Augustine . On March 4 , the Continental Marines advanced and took control of the poorly defended town .

The Continental forces remained at Nassau for two weeks and took away all the remaining gunpowder and munitions they could . The fleet returned to New London , Connecticut , in early April , after capturing a few British supply ships , and failed to capture HMS Glasgow in an action on April 6 .

= = Background = =

When the American Revolutionary War broke out in 1775 , Lord Dunmore , the British provincial governor of the Colony of Virginia , with the British forces under his command , had removed Virginia 's store of provincial arms and gunpowder to the island of New Providence in the Crown Colony of the Bahamas , in order to keep it from falling into the hands of the rebel militia . Montfort Browne , the Bahamian governor , was alerted by General Thomas Gage in August 1775 that the rebel colonists might make attempts to seize these supplies .

The desperate shortage of gunpowder available to the Continental Army had led the Second Continental Congress to organize a naval expedition , one of whose goals was the seizure of the military supplies at Nassau . While the orders issued by the congress to Esek Hopkins , the fleet captain selected to lead the expedition , included only instructions for patrolling and raiding British naval targets on the Virginia and Carolina coastline , additional instructions may have been given to Hopkins in secret meetings of the congress ' naval committee . The instructions that Hopkins issued to his fleet 's captains before it sailed from Cape Henlopen , Delaware , on February 17 , 1776 , included instructions to rendezvous at Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas .

The fleet that Hopkins launched consisted of Alfred , Hornet , Wasp , Fly , Andrew Doria , Cabot , Providence , and Columbus . In addition to ships ' crews , it carried 200 marines under the command of Samuel Nicholas . In spite of gale force winds , the fleet remained together for two days , when Fly and Hornet became separated from the fleet . Hornet was forced to return to port for repairs , and Fly eventually caught up with the fleet at Nassau , after the raid took place . Hopkins did not let the apparent loss of the two ships dissuade him ; he had intelligence that much of the British fleet was in port due to the high winds .

= = Prelude = =

Browne received further intelligence in late February that a rebel fleet was assembling off the Delaware coast , but apparently took no significant actions to prepare a defense . New Providence 's harbor had two primary defenses , Fort Nassau and Fort Montagu . Fort Nassau was located in Nassau , but was poorly sited to defend the port against amphibious attacks , and had walls that were not strong enough to support the action of its 46 cannons . As a result , Fort Montagu had been constructed in 1742 on the eastern end of the harbor , commanding its entrance . At the time of the raid , it was fortified with 17 cannons , although most of the gunpowder and ordnance was at

Fort Nassau .

The fleet arrived at Abaco Island on March 1 , 1776 . The force captured two sloops owned by Loyalists , one of those men being Captain Gideon Lowe of Green Turtle Cay , and pressed their owners to serve as pilots . George Dorsett , a local ship 's captain , got away from Abaco and alerted Browne to the presence of the rebel fleet . The landing force was transferred to the two captured sloops and Providence the next day , and plans were formulated for the assault . While the main fleet held back , the three ships carrying the landing force were to enter the port at daybreak on March 3 , and gain control of the town before the alarm could be raised .

The decision to land at daybreak turned out to be a mistake , as the alarm was raised in Nassau when the three ships were spotted in the morning light , rousing Browne from his bed . He ordered four guns fired from Fort Nassau to alert the militia ; two of the guns came off their mounts when they were fired . At 7 : 00am he held a discussion with Samuel Gambier , one of his councilors , over the idea that the gunpowder should be removed from the islands on the Mississippi Packet , a fast ship docked in the harbor . They ultimately did not act on the idea , but Browne ordered thirty mostly unarmed militiamen to occupy Fort Montagu , before retiring to his house to make himself " a little decent " .

= = Battle = =

= = = Landing and capture = = =

When the guns at Fort Nassau were heard by the attackers , they realized their surprise was lost and aborted the assault . The elements of the fleet rejoined in Hanover Sound , about six nautical miles east of Nassau . There Hopkins held council , and a new plan of attack was developed . According to accounts now discredited , Hopkins ' lieutenant , John Paul Jones , suggested a new landing point and then led the action . Jones was unfamiliar with the local waters , unlike many of the captains present in the council . It is more likely that the landing force was led by Cabot 's lieutenant , Thomas Weaver , who was also familiar with the area . With the force enlarged by 50 sailors , the three ships , with the Wasp offering additional covering support , carried it to a point south and east of Fort Montagu , where they made an unopposed landing between 12 : 00 and 2 : 00 pm . This was the first landing of what eventually became the United States Marine Corps .

A Lieutenant Burke led a detachment out from Fort Montagu to investigate the rebel activity . Given that he was severely outnumbered , he opted to send a truce flag to determine their intentions . From this he learned that their objective was the powder and military stores . In the meantime , Browne arrived at Fort Montagu with another eighty militiamen . Upon learning the size of the advancing force , he ordered three of the fort 's guns fired , and withdrew all but a few men back to Nassau . He himself retired to the governor 's house , while most of the militiamen , rather than attempting to make a stand , also returned to their homes . Browne sent Burke out to parley with the rebels a second time , in order to " wait on the command officer of the enemy to know his errand and on what account he had landed his troops . "

The firing of Montagu 's guns had given Nichols pause for concern , but his men had occupied the fort , and he was consulting with his officers on their next move when Burke arrived . They obligingly repeated to Burke that they had arrived to take the powder and weapons , and were prepared to assault the town . Burke brought this news back to Browne around 4 : 00 pm . Rather than advance further on Nassau , Nichols and his force remained at Fort Montagu that night . Browne held a war council that evening , in which the decision was made to attempt the removal of the gunpowder . At midnight , 162 of 200 barrels of gunpowder were loaded onto the Mississippi Packet and HMS St. John , and at 2 : 00 am they sailed out of Nassau harbor , bound for Saint Augustine . This feat was made possible because Hopkins had neglected to post even a single ship to guard the harbor 's entrance channels , leaving the fleet safely anchored in Hanover Sound .

Nichols ' marines occupied Nassau without resistance the next morning after a leaflet written by Hopkins was distributed throughout the town . They were met en route by a committee of the town 's

leaders , who offered up the town 's keys .

= = = Return voyage = = =

Hopkins and his fleet remained at Nassau for two weeks , loading as much weaponry as would fit onto the ships , including the remaining 38 casks of gunpowder . He pressed into service a local sloop , the Endeavour , to carry some of the material . Browne complained that the rebel officers consumed most of his liquor stores during the occupation , and also wrote that he was taken in chains like a " felon to the gallows " when he was arrested and taken to the Alfred .

During their sojourn at Nassau , the Fly arrived . Her captain reported that she and the Hornet had fouled their riggings together and that Hornet suffered significant damage as a consequence . On March 17 , the fleet sailed for Block Island Channel off Newport , Rhode Island , with Browne and other officials as prisoners . The return voyage was uneventful until the fleet reached the waters of Long Island . On April 4 they encountered and captured HMS Hawk , and the next day they captured the Bolton , which was laden with stores that included more armaments and powder . The fleet finally met resistance on April 6 , when it encountered HMS Glasgow , a sixth @-@ rate ship . In the ensuing action , the outnumbered Glasgow managed to escape capture , severely damaging the Cabot in the process , wounding her captain , Hopkins ' son John Burroughs Hopkins , and killing or wounding eleven others .

The fleet sailed into the harbor at New London , Connecticut on April 8 .

= = Aftermath = =

Browne was eventually exchanged for American general William Alexander (Lord Stirling) , and was roundly criticized for his handling of the whole affair . Nassau remained relatively poorly defended and was again subjected to American rebel threat in January 1778 . It was then seized by Spanish forces under Bernardo de Gálvez in 1782 , and returned to British control after the war .

While Hopkins was initially lauded for the success at Nassau , the failure to capture the Glasgow and crew complaints about some of the captains led to a variety of investigations and courts martial . As a result of these , the Providence 's captain was relieved of his command , which was given to Jones . Jones , who had performed well in the Glasgow encounter in spite of a crew reduced by disease , thereafter received a captain 's commission in the Continental Navy .

The manner by which Hopkins distributed the spoils was criticized , and his failure to follow his orders to patrol the Virginia shore resulted in censure by the Continental Congress . After a series of further missteps and accusations , Hopkins was forced out of the navy in 1778 .

Two ships of the United States Navy have been christened USS Nassau ; USS Nassau (LHA @-@ 4) , an amphibious assault ship , is named specifically in recognition of this battle , while USS Nassau (CVE @-@ 16) was named for Nassau Sound , the body of water between Florida and the Bahamas .