

‘The Grand Old Man of the Marine Corps’

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On a summer day in 1836, a young Marine second lieutenant turned the corner of 8th and I Streets in Washington, D.C., and passed through the gate leading to the Marine barracks. After being directed to the central building that served as both a residence and offices, he passed through the front door and made his way down the ground-floor corridor headed for the main office. Under his left arm, he carried a set of freshly minted orders assigning him to report directly to the Marine Corps Commandant for training in the nation’s capital. As he paused at the door to adjust the leather collar that aided his ramrod posture and take a deep breath before entering the hallowed domain on the other side of the heavy wooden door, he was surprised to see a note pinned to it. With astonishment, he read the words scrawled in heavy black ink: “Gone to Florida to fight the Indians. Will be back when the war is over.”



Colonel Archibald Henderson, the fifth Commandant of the Marine Corps, worked tirelessly at maintaining the service’s autonomy and keeping his Marines ready to respond to any emergency. Marine Corps History Division

The note was referring to the Second Seminole War, then in its second year, and though it bore no signature, the note had been written by Archibald Henderson, then in his 16th year as Commandant of the Marine Corps. Already the longest-serving Commandant, he would go on to serve another 23 years under 11 U.S. Presidents, ultimately leaving office in death rather than retirement.

Before assuming that office, Henderson had distinguished himself during the War of 1812 and the Second Barbary War in 1815. He had served in the famous frigate *Constitution*, and his valor had earned him a brevet promotion to major in 1814, just eight years after his commissioning.

But, with the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, there was no perceived threat from Europe, and the nation became focused on expansion rather than defense. The armed forces of the new nation entered a period of malaise, with the Marine Corps reduced to 49 officers and 865 enlisted men by 1820, the year Henderson—a 37-year-old lieutenant colonel—was appointed as Commandant of the Corps.

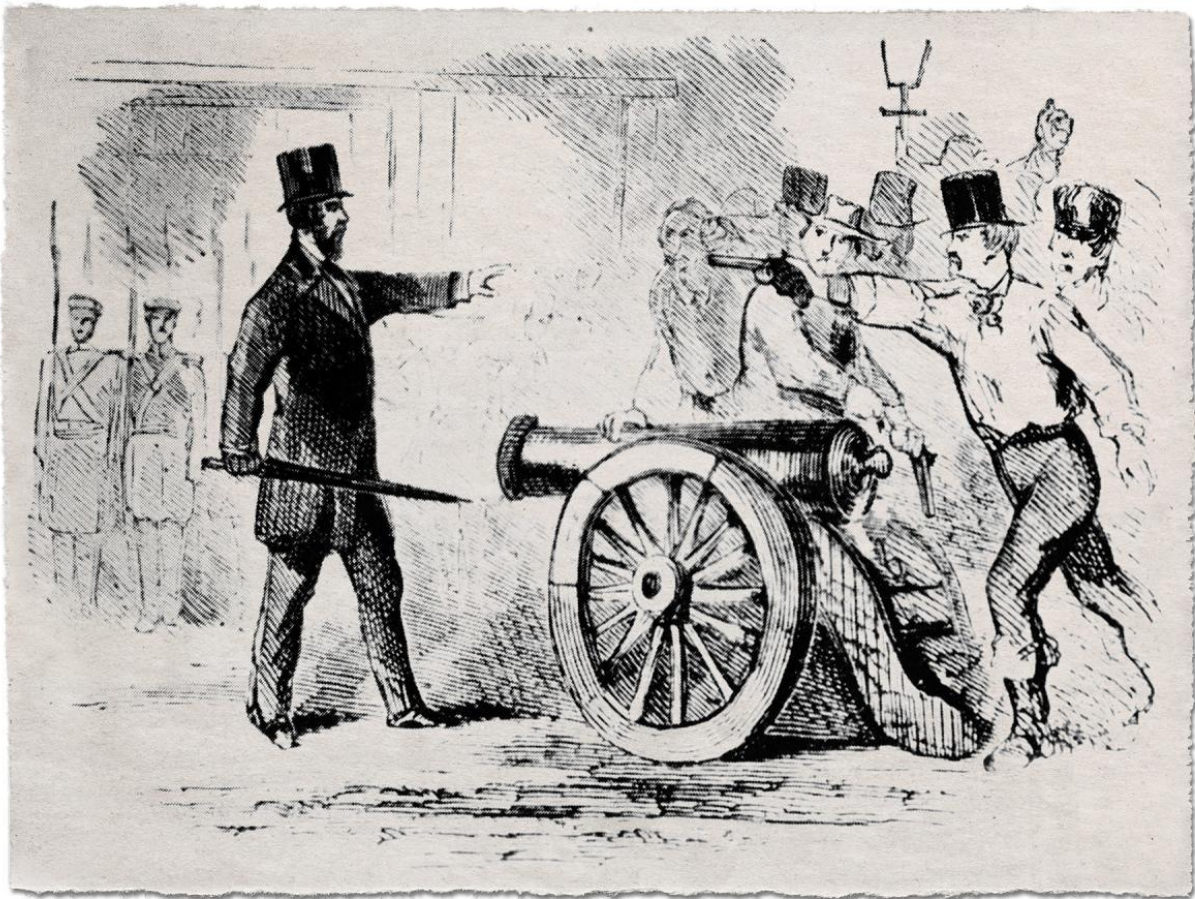
Henderson hit the ground running, making training and spirit his priorities. To personally supervise their indoctrination and training, he ordered all newly commissioned officers to duty at Marine Corps Headquarters. Since the Army was unable to absorb all of the West Point graduates at that time, many were offered commissions in the Marine Corps. Determined to revamp the force, Henderson personally inspected every shore station and vessel detachment, ensuring officers and enlisted members alike received proper recognition and efficient support. His rigorous oversight instilled discipline and boosted esprit de corps. Known for his assertiveness, even when dealing with superiors, Henderson once went directly to the President to overrule the Secretary of the Navy when the latter had countermanded Henderson's order to send one of his officers to sea.

In 1822, Henderson married. Anne Maria Casanova took charge of the Commandant's quarters and, like her husband, ruled with an iron hand for the 36 years they lived there. She declared, among other things, that "no cards will ever be played in my house." As far as history records, she was obeyed.

In 1829, President Andrew Jackson proposed merging the Marine Corps with the Army. Henderson resisted, lobbying Congress until it passed the pivotal Act for the Better Organization of the United States Marine Corps in 1834. This act confirmed the Marine Corps as a separate entity under the Department of the Navy, firmly cementing its independence.

That same year, Henderson was promoted to colonel and, in 1837, he earned another brevet promotion—this time to brigadier general—for his courageous front-line service during the Seminole War.

As Commandant, Henderson worked tirelessly at maintaining the Corps' autonomy and keeping his Marines ever ready for any emergency, handling various crises in China, Central America, the South Pacific, and Africa. During the Mexican–American War (1846–48), Henderson's Marines stormed Chapultepec Castle—later immortalized in the Marine's Hymn as “the Halls of Montezuma.”



In 1857, Henderson deployed two companies of Marines to Baltimore to protect the city against rioters who were threatening voters. When the “Plug Uglies” confronted the Marines with a cannon, Henderson—who had been milling about in civilian clothes—stepped out of the crowd and positioned himself directly in front of the cannon’s muzzle. Naval History and Heritage Command

In 1857, the Know Nothing party resorted to a gang of thugs—known as “Plug Uglies”—to threaten voters and take possession of the polling places in Washington, D.C. At the President’s direction, Henderson deployed two

companies of Marines to the beleaguered city. Near City Hall, the well-armed thugs confronted the Marines with a cannon. Commandant Henderson—who had been milling about in civilian clothes, observing the deteriorating situation—stepped out of the crowd and calmly positioned himself directly in front of the cannon’s muzzle, warning the rioters that his Marines were prepared to open fire if necessary.

Several rioters did open fire, but their aim was poor, missing Henderson, their intended target. When one of the Plug Uglies took careful aim at Henderson’s head, before he could pull the trigger a Marine knocked the pistol out of the villain’s hand with a butt stroke of his musket. Henderson then grabbed the man by his collar and the seat of his pants and took custody of him for a quick trip to the nearby city jail. With the situation quickly getting out of control, the Marines opened fire on the rioters and soon order was restored.

Two years later, colorful Archibald Henderson—still on active duty—passed away quietly on 6 January 1859, ending the longest term as Commandant in Marine Corps history at 38 years, leaving a legacy of lasting influence and inspiring service. Today, he is affectionately remembered as “the Grand Old Man of the Marine Corps.”