

# To the Shores of Tripoli

## Greek Soldiers and the American-Tripolitan War of 1801-1805

By Harry Psomiades, Ph.D.

*This is the story of the first Greek contingent to participate in an American war and of the success of Greek-American arms at Derne, Tripoli in 1805. It is also the story of William Eaton, a long forgotten American hero; and of timid men and a miserly Congress acquiescing to the threats of minor potentates.*

In May 1801, Joseph Pasha of Tripoli (Libya), feeling that he was not receiving enough tribute money (\$83,000 a year), declared war on the United States. Until then, the new American state had paid almost \$2 million, one-fifth of its annual revenue, to the Barbary states of Tunis, Tripoli, Algiers, and Morocco—either to ransom American prisoners or in return for permitting American merchant ships to sail the Mediterranean. The failure of the young Republic to restrain the appetite of the Pasha of Tripoli could only mean further extortions from the other Barbary states and the elimination of American commerce from the Mediterranean.

For a variety of reasons, the naval war with Tripoli dragged along in desultory fashion until 1804, when Commodore Edward Preble appeared off the shores of Tripoli with a sizable task force and began a series of bombardments on Tripolitan ports. Unfortunately, before Preble's arrival off the port town of Tripoli, the frigate *Philadelphia* ran upon an uncharted reef while on blockade duty and its commanding officer, captain William Bainbridge, and crew of 307 men were taken prisoner. Moreover, an onshore wind enabled the Tripolitans to refloat *Philadelphia*, stop its leaks, and bring the ship into port. However, the prize of a seaworthy frigate was soon denied the Pasha when lieutenant Stephen Decatur, with a crew of volunteers, entered the harbor at night and destroyed *Philadelphia* by setting it ablaze. Decatur returned to his post without the loss of a single man.

Although the American Mediterranean naval force was considerably strengthened, thanks to the reaction of the U.S. Congress and public to the news of *Philadelphia*, the release of the ship's crew and an "honorable"

peace with Tripoli seemed to escape all of our efforts. However, the tide was finally turned with the extraordinary exploits of a former army officer named William Eaton, American consul at Tunis.

Eaton was convinced that the war would not end with blockade and bombardments and persuaded President Thomas Jefferson and the new U.S. commander in the Mediterranean, Commodore Samuel Barron, to espouse the cause of a pretender to the Tripolitan "throne," then in exile in Egypt. A ruler beholden to the United States, it was argued, would be amenable to rational influences and disposed to negotiate reasonable terms. The plan, it should be pointed out, was opposed by most of Jefferson's cabinet and actual responsibility for conducting the negotiations with Tripoli was given to colonel Tobias Lear, consul general of the Barbary regencies. Although Eaton was aware of this and admitted in his journal that he "carried no evidence whatever from our government of the sincerity of its intentions toward the friendly Hamet Pasha," the exiled Pasha of Tripoli, he was not to be daunted.

On November 25, 1804, Eaton arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, in search of Hamet Pasha and started to recruit and organize a small army of the invasion of Tripoli. After locating the pretender and gaining permission of the Ottoman-Turkish authorities to take him out of the country, Eaton prepared a fourteen-point convention which was to govern relations between the United States and his Highness Hamet Caramanly. Bashaw, the legitimate Sovereign of the kingdom of Tripoli. The convention, signed on February 23, committed the United States to aid in the dethronement of the usurper, Joseph, and to reestablish Hamet as ruler of Tripoli. It provided for the release of all American prisoners and for the establish-

ment of perpetual peace between the two governments. It recognized William Eaton as "General and Commander in chief of the land forces, which are, or may be, called into service against the common enemy." Article V of the convention was interesting in that it betrayed Eaton's Yankee trader background and was contrary to the theoretical American attitude toward the world community. It obliged Hamet to reimburse American expenditures in restoring him to the "throne" from tribute paid to Tripoli by Denmark, Sweden, and the Batavian Republic!

On March 8, 1805, the self-appointed general led his force into the Western Desert and began the march of 500 miles along the Mediterranean littoral to Derne, Tripoli's second largest town. Eaton's army consisted of 9 Americans—lieutenant O'Bannon, a sergeant, and 6 other enlisted marines, and midshipman Peck; a company of 40 Greeks, including their commanding officers, captain Luco Ulovic and lieutenant Constantine; and a company of 28 Europeans and Christian Levantines, including 25 cannoniers, commanded by Scrim Comb, and lieutenants Connant and Roco. Hamet Pasha's suit consisted of about 90 men. These together with a squadron of Arab cavalry and about 100 footmen and camel drivers placed the total number of the force at about 400. The caravan consisted of 107 camels.

Before we examine the significant role played by the Greek mercenaries in the Derne campaign, it is appropriate to ask: Who were they? Where did they come from? What were they doing in Egypt? The documents tell us very little. However, it is clear that at the time they were hired they were an organized, disciplined, and well-trained force with combat experience. Since they had two Greek officers, captain Luco Ulovic and lieutenant Constantine, it is possible that they were at one time two separate bands. Indeed, after the fail of Derne, Constantine is referred to by Eaton as captain Constantine. Captain Ulovic may have been a Greek-speaking Slav or simply a Greek with a Slavic

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*The author is Professor of Political Science at Queens College of the City University of New York.*

name, which was not unusual among Greeks of the Balkan mainland.

Given the nature of the Greek colony in Egypt, essentially commercial, it is highly unlikely that it could provide military bands imbued with the kleptich tradition. To find the origins of a disciplined Greek military force, we must look to the Greek mainland. It is highly probable that the Greek force Eaton recruited came from the Peloponnese in the Greek mainland after 1770 and/or were brought to Egypt by the French or the British after 1797. The nine years of turmoil which followed the Russian-inspired rising in the Peloponnese in 1770 had increased the class of klephts ("brigands") who took to the mountains and lived in open rebellion against Ottoman authorities. The period also marks the transition of the klephts from robber bands to national resistance bodies. Many of the Greek inhabitants fled the Peloponnese altogether and some undoubtedly went to Egypt either for security or to seek their fortunes.

In 1797, as a result of the treaty of Campo-Formio, the French temporarily occupied the Ionian islands and the small Venetian outposts on the coast of Albania and Greece. The French, under the command of general Gentili, were in close communication, during this period, with Greek kleptich bands of Epiros and western Rumely, who frequently sought refuge from the Turks in the former Venetian territory. The klephts and particularly the warriors of Suli often received arms and money from the French and, on occasion, were recruited into the French service. It is, therefore, possible that in Napoleon's schemes in the decade following 1797 for defeating Britain by occupation of, or transit through the lands of the Near East, the Greek klephts or volunteers played a role, albeit a minor one. Britain's attempt to counter the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801) which led to the British-Turkish victory of the Nile in 1801 may also have involved the recruiting of Greek armed bands by the service in Egypt. Indeed, for three decades after the initial Greek rising in the Peloponnese in 1770, Greek armed bands and regular Turkish forces cooperated in reducing the marauding activities of the Muslim Albanians in the Peloponnese and elsewhere in Greek lands.

Following the French and British withdrawals from Egypt, the country, from 1802 to 1805, experienced a complete breakdown of law and order. Calm was not restored until 1805

(after the exit of Eaton's army from Egypt) when an Albanian soldier from Kavala named Mohammed Ali succeeded in smashing the tyranny of the Mamelukes, the alien ruling class of Egypt, and in subduing the unruly bands of armed deserters from Turkish service. During this period of lawlessness, our Greek band was almost certainly employed by foreigners and local elites to provide protection for their person and property. From Eaton's journal we know that they were on good terms with the local Ottoman authorities.

Under Eaton's command this motley expeditionary force marched over 500 miles across the Libyan desert. And, on more than one occasion during the march the day was saved by the loyalty and steadfastness of Eaton's Greek contingent and by the small detachment of American marines. Despite the equivocation and non-cooperation of Hamet Pasha, several threats of desertion and mutiny by the Arab auxiliaries, and extreme shortages of food and water, Eaton managed to reach the outskirts of Derne on April 24. Three days later, with the help of gunfire from three American man-of-war brigs— *Nautilus*, *Argos*, and *Hornet*, Derne was taken by storm.

The following are excerpts from Eaton's correspondence describing the siege of Derne:

... A detachment of six American marines, a-company of 24 cannoniers and another of 26 Greeks, including their proper officers, all under the immediate command of lieutenant O'Bannon, together with a few Arabs on foot, had a position in the eminence opposite to a considerable party of the enemy, who had taken post behind their temporary parapets and in a ravine at the S.E. quarter of the town. . . . The Bashaw (Hamet Pasha) seized an old castle which overlooked the town in the S.S.W. disposing his cavalry upon the plain in the rear.

... Lieutenant O'Bannon urged forward with his marines, Greeks, and such of the cannoniers as were not necessary to the management of the field piece; passed through a shower of musketry from the walls of houses; took possession of the battery; planted the American flag upon the ramparts; and turned its guns upon the enemy. . . . The Bashaw soon got possession of the Bay's palace; his cavalry flanked the flying enemy; and a little after four o'clock we had complete possession of the tow\*!.

... Of the Christians who fought on shore, 1 lost fourteen killed and wounded; Three of those are marines, one dead and another dying; The rest chiefly Greeks, who in this little affair, well supported their ancient character.

In May, the Tripolitans attempted

to retake Derne and in the ensuing skirmishes Eaton again was struck by the "firm and manly" character of the Greeks:

Attacked and defeated a detached party of the enemy of about sixty foot and troop of horses, with only thirty-five Americans and Greeks. . . . They opposed to us a short resistance but fled before a charge of bayonet.

It is clear from Eaton's account that Derne could not have been taken and held without the Greeks who bore the brunt of most of the fighting.

Immediately after the fall of Derne, Eaton's position was threatened by the constant counter offenses of the enemy. Over 6,000 Tripolitan troops, including reinforcements from Tripoli, had taken up positions outside the town which only a few days earlier had been occupied by Eaton's army. The expected risings in favor of Hamet Pasha were not forthcoming and Eaton was denied by Commodore Barron further supplies and manpower to defeat or buy off his attackers and proceed to Tripoli.

Nevertheless, the tide of war had turned. To continuing blockade and further captures of enemy ships at sea had been added the fact that the Americans and the pretender now held the second town of Tripoli. Yet, Washington proved reluctant to press its advantage over Joseph Pasha, who was "deeply impressed" by Eaton's activities and was moved to discuss conditions of peace. The American negotiators—the sick Barron, the weak Lear, and the prisoner Bainbridge—all concluded that an immediate settlement justified the abandonment of Hamet's cause and the ransoming of the crew of *Philadelphia*. So in June 1805 peace was made, the ransom paid, the prisoners released, the tribute remained-albeit reduced, and Eaton, the Christian troops, and Hamet were evacuated from Derne. Needless to say Eaton felt betrayed and upon his return to America spent the remaining years of his life indulging in vituperation and near slander against the men responsible for the "dishonorable" Tripolitan peace treaty of 1805. The Greek contingent was evacuated to Sicily and from there drifted back to the Levantine marches. The Greek war for independence was 16 years away. ■