



Old Ironsides

This 1927 oil painting of the *USS Constitution*, by Gordon Grant (1875-1962), hangs in the White House. More than a million reproductions were sold in 1927 to help finance one of several restorations of the old warship. The *Constitution* was launched in Boston in 1797, and she is docked there today.

America, while still a mouse of a country, roared at the mighty British lion nearly 200 years ago. No, it wasn't the Revolutionary War. That took place 30 years earlier. This was 1812 and the United States was fed up with the arrogance of the Royal Navy. In England's long war with Napoleon, it had built so many warships that it couldn't man them with skilled seamen from its home islands alone. So it effectively kidnapped sailors from American ships on the high seas. President James Madison and the U.S. Congress declared war. The year named the hostilities. The War of 1812 began.

The British were contemptuous. The young U.S. Navy in 1812 had eight frigates and 12 sloops, only 20 warships under sail. The Royal Navy truly ruled the world's seas with an incredible 584 men-of-war. But three of the American frigates, including the *USS Constitution*, were big ones, rated at 44 guns although actually carrying more than 50. British frigates were generally 38s. The *Constitution* was no match for a 64-gun or 72-gun Royal Navy ship of the line, but she was fast and could outrun one. The English did not appreciate these little details at the time. They

were accustomed to victory and expected more of it in this annoying war with a former colony.

In quick succession, however, the *Constitution* fought and captured *HMS Guerriere*, and then an American sister frigate, the *USS President*, captured *HMS Macedonian*. The *Constitution* got her "Old Ironsides" nickname when *Guerriere* cannon balls bounced off her 21½-inch oak armor. A little later, the *Constitution* caught *HMS Java* off Brazil and captured and burned her. Meanwhile, American warships and privateers were busy snatching up British merchant vessels everywhere, even in the English Channel. It was England's worst nightmare come true.

"A third British frigate has struck to an American!" cried the *London Times* with admirable candor and understandable frustration. "On 29th of December, his Majesty's frigate *Java* ... was captured by the United States frigate *Constitution* ... after a desperate action of an hour and 55 minutes.... This is an occurrence that calls for serious reflection.... Upward of 500 British vessels [have been] captured in seven months by the Americans. Five hundred merchantmen, and three frigates! Can these statements be true? ... Anyone who had predicted

such a result in an American war, this time last year, would have been treated as a mad man or traitor.”

Incensed and newly determined, the British did manage to capture a small American frigate, the *USS Chesapeake*, in 1813, and the following year they burned Washington, D.C. But in the end, they sued for peace and promised to leave American sailors alone. The *Constitution*, at sea and unaware of the peace treaty, captured two more Royal Navy frigates, *HMS Cyane* with 34 guns and *HMS Levant* with 21. More salt for British wounds, more pricks to British pride.

“Old Ironsides” retired undefeated after 42 battles with Barbary pirates and Royal Navy seamen. She never lost a battle. She captured 20 vessels in her active career, and she herself was never boarded by the enemy. The *Constitution* settled down in Boston Harbor, where she was built in the late 18th century and where she would be restored again and again. Somehow we Americans were smart enough to save and preserve this historic sailing ship. As the oldest, commissioned, still-afloat warship in the world, she continues to serve as the official flagship of the U.S Navy, and proud Academy graduates are commissioned aboard her.

Salute From Above

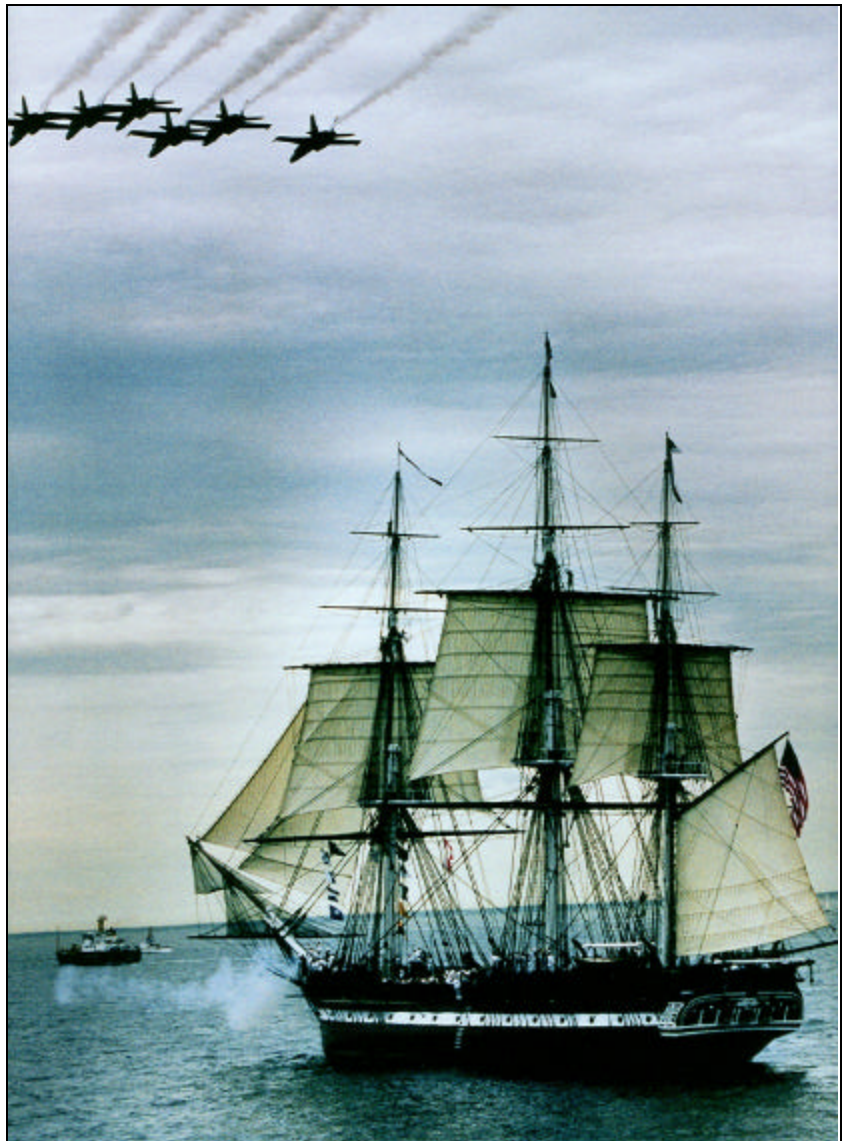
The extraordinary photo at right was taken just a few years ago, in 1997, when the *USS Constitution* celebrated her 200th birthday. She sailed proudly into Massachusetts Bay, with flags flying, and fired a cannon in recognition of a high salute from the Navy’s Blue Angels. Several times a year the *Constitution* glides out of her Charleston Navy Yard berth, sometimes under her own sail power. Perhaps it was this mobility that caused the New York mayor to ask a favor of the Boston mayor, if we can believe an often-told story. Baseball is not the only way the two cities compete. The New York mayor asked Boston to loan out the *Constitution* for a New York historical celebration. The exchange went like this:

Boston: “Well, we’ll have to get back to you on that.”

New York: “What’s the problem?”

Boston: “We’ve got to figure out where to put the *Statue of Liberty*.”

Yes, it’s just a joke, but a good one.



Jackson & Yoshi Go Aboard

It wasn't easy. Security for the *USS Constitution* is about the same as that for a modern warship. We can't allow anyone to blow up a national treasure. Once we were aboard, Yoshi gravitated to an American Eagle carving, while I was intrigued by the cannonades on the quarterdeck. These stubby guns were called "Smashers" because that's exactly what they did to any enemy hull that ventured close. The long cannons are on the gun deck below. Cannons are heavy, but the *Constitution* can carry them because she is still afloat. By contrast, England's famed *HMS Victory*, three decades older, sits high and dry on her keel in Portsmouth, so all but one of her cannons must be plastic fabrications. I prefer the real thing in Boston.

Jackson Sellers, Lake Forest, Calif., Nov. 2005

