Some Stories of Old Ironsides

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SOME STORIES OF OLD IRONSIDES ***

SOME STORIES OF OLD IRONSIDES

By
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Author of *We Build a Navy*

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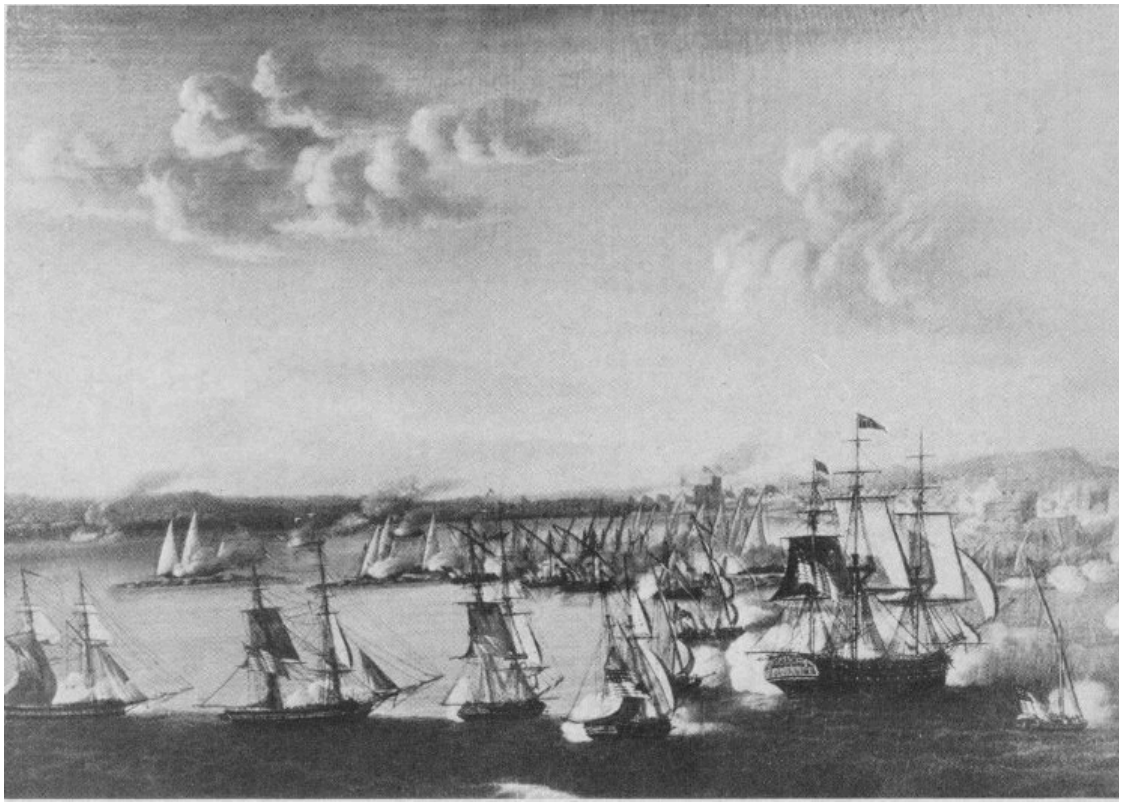
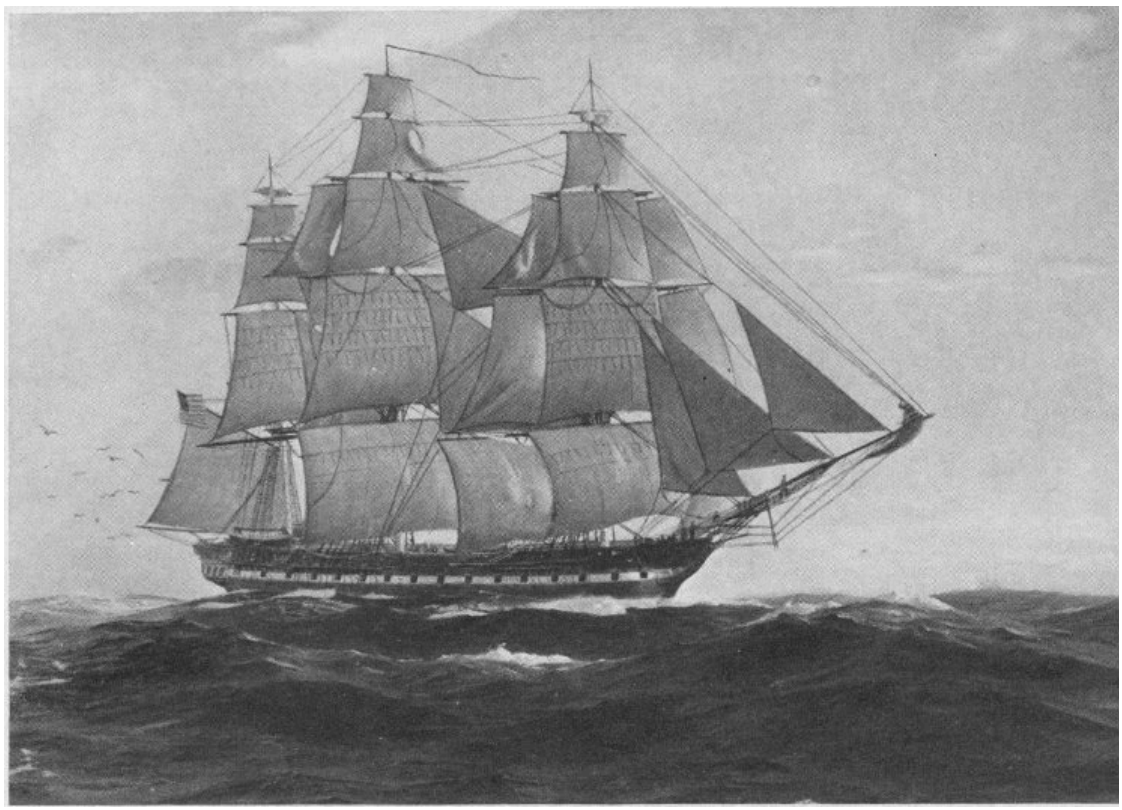


From a painting by M. Carne

PREBLE'S FIRST ATTACK ON TRIPOLI

The *Constitution* (large ship right center foreground) leading the attack on Tripoli, August 3, 1804.



From a painting by C. R. Patterson
"OLD IRONSIDES"

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ACT I
In the Mediterranean

SCENE I. ENTER THE "CONSTITUTION"

On a September day in 1803 an American frigate bowled along the rocky Spanish coast toward Gibraltar. From her bluff bows curled back a foamy wave. Above the blue waters rose a gracefully proportioned black hull. Around it, halfway up from the water line, ran a broad white stripe. This was broken at regular intervals by the dark squares of the gun ports. Spars tapered aloft. White rectangles of billowing canvas completed a picture of beauty unsurpassed on the Seven Seas. Such was the United States ship *Constitution*. Joshua Humphreys, naval constructor, had done his work well.

Watchers on the famous Rock might have noted, had the beauty of this strange ship gained their full attention, that from the mizzen truck flew the broad blue pennant of a commodore. His name was then unknown. It is not too well known even now. But as time passes the conviction grows that Edward Preble should be classed in the first rank of our naval commanders. He was soon to prove that he was every inch a commodore. His pennant flew from a splendid ship, but one which had as yet no tradition of victory. Edward Preble was to begin that long series of successful cruises and spectacular sea fights which was to endear "Old Ironsides" to every American.

Countless ships for countless years had passed these far-famed Pillars of Hercules. Some had sailed on errands of peace, but most on the grim business of war. Phoenician traders had sailed out northward to Britain for cargoes of its precious tin. Carthaginian merchants under Hanno had ventured far down the Atlantic coast of Africa. Scipio Africanus with his legions had come this way to complete the conquest of Spain. Moorish galleys had ferried to Europe those fierce Moslem horsemen who overran the Iberian Peninsula and fought for world empire on the battlefields of France. Norse sea kings had sailed on through to Sicily and Constantinople. Stout De Ruyter and his Dutch seamen had followed in their track to make his last campaign in the blue waters of the Mediterranean. And

only five years before the greatest sea captain of them all, a certain Horatio Nelson, had hastened by to match his wits with a General Bonaparte and annihilate his fleet at the mouth of the Nile.

The entry of Edward Preble in a Yankee frigate into the great sea which had supported so many war fleets seemed doubtless at that time utterly devoid of historical significance. But now, as we look back over a century and a quarter, it takes on a new importance. It was to bring our young Navy to a new plane of efficiency. It was to demonstrate to Americans in a striking manner the value of an efficient naval service. It was to establish our Navy as a permanent American institution. And, what is more, it signaled to watchful eyes abroad the rise of a new sea power. It indicated, not only to African pirates, but also to astute European statesmen, that this American Republic had become a factor they would have to reckon with in framing their diplomatic policies. 7

We believe that, as much as any other man of that era, it was bold and forceful Edward Preble who gave the United States that initial impulsion along the path of astounding prosperity, unparalleled commercial power, and world-wide influence.

For two years we had been at war with the Moslem principalities which lined the Mediterranean coast of Africa. For many years before that, their piratical craft had captured our merchant ships and sold their crews into slavery. We had first begged and then bribed these pirates to desist from piracy. And, finally, after all diplomatic

measures had failed, that task was given the Navy. That service had been in existence only a few years. It was, we must confess, not properly prepared to conduct a difficult campaign so far from its home bases. So two years of desultory fighting had accomplished little. In despair, our statesmen had descended again to the artifices of bribery. But, fortunately for us, the piratical chieftains did not think our offers worth their while. So the Navy was given a final chance and Edward Preble the command. The backbone of his squadron were the fine frigates *Constitution* and *Philadelphia*. For inshore work there were the brigs *Argus* and *Siren* and the schooners *Enterprise*, *Nautilus*, and *Vixen*. It is true that seven ships constituted a small force to keep in good humor Morocco, Algiers, and Tunis and bring to a favorable conclusion the war with Tripoli. But the ships were all finely commanded, well officered, and manned with the best sailors in the world. The ships themselves were well built, adequately equipped, and completely stored for a long campaign. So it was with high hopes that Preble commenced his difficult task—one, it may be added, which had baffled Cardinal Ximenes, Charles V, Andrea Doria, Blake, De Ruyter, and Duquesne.

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SCENE II. EXIT THE "PHILADELPHIA"

An effective demonstration off Tangiers soon cooled the ardor of the Sultan of Morocco. He reconfirmed the old and highly favorable treaty of 1786. One potential enemy had been removed. On now for Syracuse, the naval base from which our campaign against Tripoli was being conducted.

Off the coast of Sardinia the *Constitution* hailed H.M.S. *Amazon*, a frigate attached to the squadron of Lord Nelson. From her Preble received "the melancholy and distressing intelligence of the loss of the U.S. ship *Philadelphia*." Here, Commodore, is a problem which will put to the test all your intelligence and stoutness of heart.

At Syracuse Preble learned the full extent of the disaster. The fine frigate had been run aground off Tripoli. Captain Bainbridge, discouraged by his ill fortune, had surrendered too quickly. Three hundred and fifteen of our officers and men had been led ashore in triumph. In his haste Bainbridge had not even taken effective measures to destroy his own ship. She was floated and brought into the harbor of Tripoli. Her guns were fished out of the water and

remounted. She was manned with a strong Tripolitan crew. Thus she contributed to the strength of the defenses, and constituted a threat to every merchant vessel in the Mediterranean. Gloomy were the thoughts of poor Bainbridge as he viewed these developments from his prison window. [9]

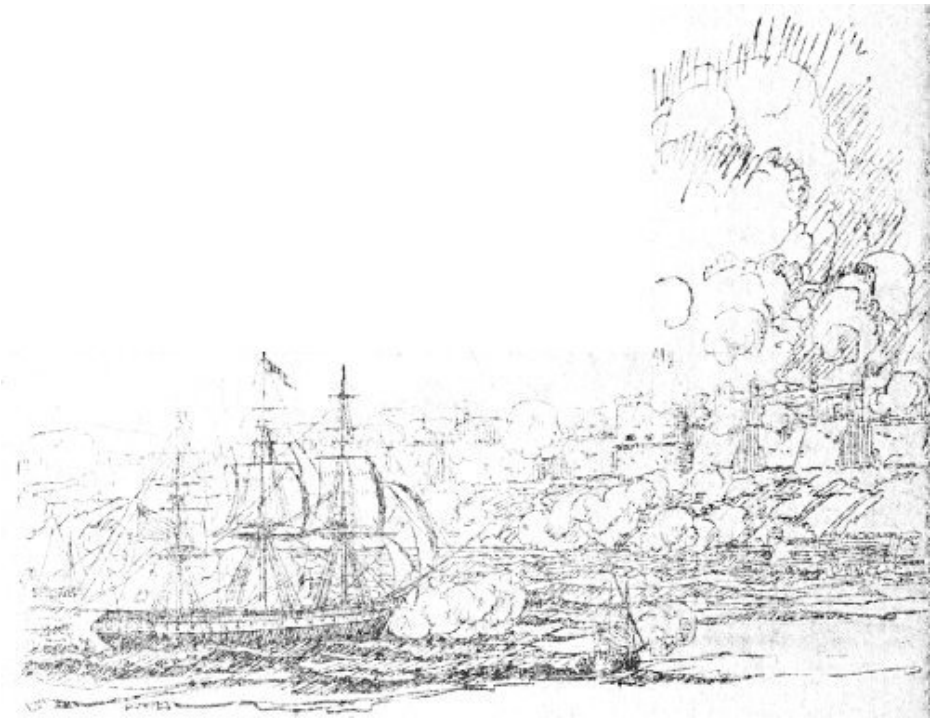
Preble was not the man to worry over past disasters. He was concerned with future successes. How could he counteract, in part at least, the loss of the *Philadelphia*? There was no direct method for rescuing the crew. But there might be a chance to regain the ship, or at least destroy her so that the enemy could not use her. Bainbridge, through the connivance of the Danish consul at Tripoli, had suggested that she be attacked by a party of men secreted in the hold of a merchant vessel. The capture of a Tripolitan ketch provided the means of carrying through this daring plan. The next essential item was a cool and daring commander.

The commodore invited to this post of honor and danger Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, then in command of the *Enterprise*. To this young officer might well be applied a sentence from Plutarch: “Being ever thirsty after honor, and passionate for glory, if anything of a greater or extraordinary nature was to be done, he was eager to be the doer of it himself.” Decatur eagerly accepted his commodore’s invitation.

Once the squadron got wind of the venture and of the commander selected, there was no lack of volunteers. Decatur naturally gave first choice to the people in his own ship. Five of her officers and sixty-two of her sailors shifted over to the ketch. This was formally commissioned and appropriately renamed *Intrepid*. Five midshipmen from the *Constitution* completed the complement. [10] Last, but by no means least, was a brave Sicilian pilot, Salvador Catalano.

Edward Preble took upon himself full responsibility for the hazardous enterprise. “It is my order,” he wrote Decatur, “that you proceed to Tripoli, in company with the *Siren*, Lieutenant Stewart; enter the harbor in the night; board the *Philadelphia*; burn her; and make good your escape.” The courage it requires to write such an order is seldom appreciated. If the expedition had failed, as certainly it looked very probable, all the blame would have fallen on Preble. He would have been accused of sending officers and men to their death while he remained in safety. And, if the attack should succeed, the credit and honor would belong to Decatur. But Preble was not

guarding his own interests. He was striving to further those of the Navy and the country.



For two weeks the *Intrepid* was battered about by a succession of storms. On this little craft, much smaller than a submarine chaser, seventy-four men were crowded. Their sufferings can scarcely be imagined. But at last the weather moderated and the long-awaited opportunity was at hand. As a reënforcement Midshipman Anderson and nine sailors rowed over in one of the *Siren's* cutters. This was towed astern of the *Intrepid*. She started in.

The sea now was smooth. The wind lulled slowly to a calm. As night came on, a young moon, the enemy's emblem, diffused a gentle light over the phosphorescent waters. Wary Odysseus might have turned back his prow at sight of such an unfavorable omen, but not all the gods on Olympus could have turned back Stephen Decatur that night. 11

Slowly and silently steals the *Intrepid* toward the harbor entrance. This cold wintry night there are no vessels on patrol. Only irregular ranks of jagged rocks keep watch. The moonlight discloses these ever present sentinels. The ship passes through.

Quietly there on deck stand Decatur, Catalano, and ten seamen—all disguised as Sicilians. Close down behind the bulwarks crouch the remainder of the crew. Ahead looms up the great hulk of the *Philadelphia*. Her foremast has not been replaced, but the main and mizzenmasts, with their network of rigging, trace a spider web of black against the dull red glare of the city's lights. Fifteen gaping gun ports are dotted with the muzzles of frowning 18-pounders, loaded, shotted, and ready to be touched off. High overhead towers the dark mass of the Bashaw's castle, its embrasures filled with one hundred and fifteen cannon.

The frigate's bell rings out the hour. It is ten-thirty in the evening watch. Her sentinel hails. Catalano answers with long-rehearsed lines. He has lost his anchors. May he not secure alongside the frigate for the night? The answer is, "Yes." Lawrence lowers a small boat. With a line from the *Intrepid* he pulls for the frigate's bows. Quickly he secures his end to the fore chains. At the other end crouching seamen haul away.

Watchers on the frigate, if they had not been too sleepy, might have wondered at the hidden power which draws the little craft so steadily upon her prey. It is not until she is almost alongside that they see the crowd of men on her decks. "Americanos!" yells the sentinel. But now it is too late. Another pull brings the *Intrepid* alongside. Then rises a confused din as her crew begin a wild scramble for the honor of being the first over the enemy's side. Decatur trips on his scabbard. Morris passes him. Over the high bulwarks, sword in teeth, he disappears. Lieutenants, midshipmen, sailors follow him. Here have ceased the privileges of rank. Those of courage begin.

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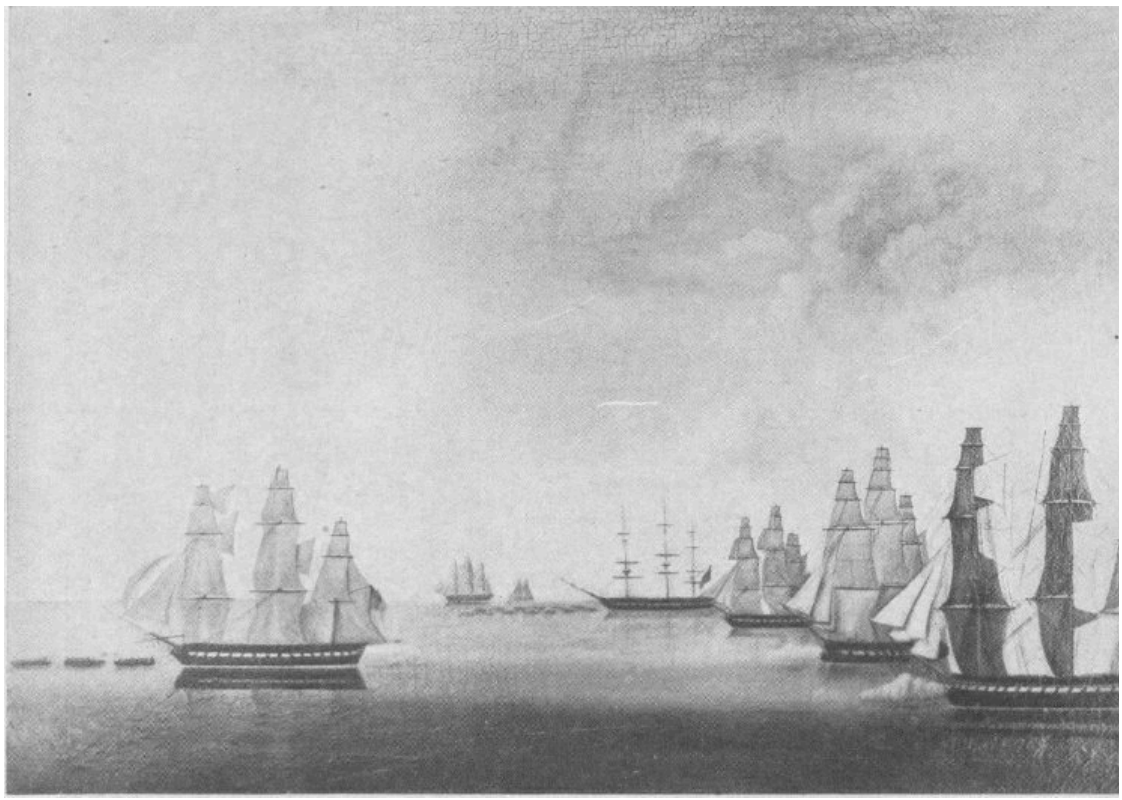
Surprise has won the day. There is no resistance on the upper decks. The startled enemy dive over the side or scuttle below. Wild Americanos or hungry sharks—what a choice to have to make! Some twenty Tripolitans fall before the former. How many succumb to the latter we may only guess. In twenty minutes the ship is everywhere ablaze. As the flames shoot up the guns ashore fire on the clearly illuminated target. Back into the ketch our sailors spring. Lines are cut with battle-axe and cutlass, just in time to evade the outrushing flames. Out ring three good American cheers above the crackling roar of fire and the thunder of cannonade.

The flames now have mounted the frigate's rigging turning night into day. The *Intrepid* is clearly disclosed to the enemy gunners.

From every direction shot converge on the little ship. Out are run sixteen great sweeps. Strong men, willing galley slaves for an hour, double-bank their handles. Their long blades churn the waters into foam. Away she races through the shell splashes.



From an old painting
CHASE OF THE *Constitution*

From the painting by John W. Jarvis
EDWARD PREBLE

Thus ended with complete success what Lord Nelson called the most bold and daring act of the age. When, three days later, the *Intrepid* sailed through the American squadron in Syracuse, each ship gave Decatur and his men a deafening salute of cheers. What music to a sailor's ears! 13

SCENE III. PREBLE ATTACKS TRIPOLI

As spring came on the commodore pushed his preparations for a naval attack on Tripoli. He now had only one large ship, the *Constitution*. There were five brigs and schooners. A captured Tripolitan brig, commissioned as the *Scourge*, made a sixth. Preble knew that these ships could not get in close enough to the enemy to win the decisive results he was determined to have. So he borrowed six gunboats, two bomb vessels, and ninety-six sailors from the King of Naples. Even with this reënforcement, Preble had but one thousand and sixty men to attack a strongly fortified town defended by twenty-five thousand soldiers and sailors. Still his hopes for success were high.

Early in August, 1804, the orders for a grand attack were issued. This was to be no distant cannonade. The *Constitution* was to attack the batteries at point-blank range. The gunboats were to board the enemy flotilla. The bomb vessels were to toss their 13-inch grenades into the town.

The Bashaw, as the Tripolitan ruler was called, saw that a storm was about to break over his head. In addition to formidable batteries ashore, he had twenty-one gunboats. These were manned by from twenty-four to forty men. Each carried one large and two small guns. We must not mistake these Tripolitans. They were splendid seamen and fierce fighters. Boarding was their usual method of attack. 14
Nine of their gunboats were stationed outside the reefs east of the harbor entrance. Five were under the powerful batteries to the westward. The remainder lay inside the harbor in reserve.

At two o'clock in the afternoon of August 3, the flagship displayed the long-awaited signal for attack. Our six gunboats, under Decatur, were to attack the nine Tripolitan craft east of the harbor. Only three of his detachment, for various reasons, reached the enemy. Now three against nine were big odds. But, thought our young fellows, the bigger the odds the greater the glory. And they had Stephen Decatur—himself worth a couple of gunboats—to lead them. He, like the Spartans, "was not wont to ask how many but where, the enemy were!"

So Decatur led the charge. He made for a large gunboat armed with a huge 29-pound cannon and two howitzers. Her crew, as we learned later, numbered thirty-six. Decatur also has one cannon, a long 24-pounder. He sails in close until he can see the white of their eyes. Then he fires. A hail of grapeshot sweeps the enemy's deck. As the two ships crash together our boarders are away. For a few minutes the fight is furious. But American pikes and cutlasses are irresistible. When only five of their people remain unwounded the Moors cry for quarter. Here is a victory, decided, as the old saying goes, by push of pike.

Meanwhile Sailing Master Trippe is having a bad quarter of an hour. He runs his gunboat alongside another enemy ship. Boarding is the order of the day. That is a good way for Americans, as well as Tripolitans, to fight. Trippe springs into the enemy gunboat. 15
Midshipman Henley and nine sailors follow. Then the ships drift apart. Here now is a situation. Trippe sees that, being too weak for defense, it is necessary to attack. He lunges at the enemy captain with his pike. The Tripolitan is a good swordsman, and his scimitar is sharp. He rains blows on Trippe's chest and shoulders—wounds him eleven times in all. But the sailing master gets in one effective thrust with his pike, and this more than evens up matters. Another Moor, whose cutlass is descending on Trippe's head from behind, is bayoneted by Marine Sergeant Jonathan Meredith. Having lost their captain and twenty of their comrades, the remaining Tripolitans now surrender.

To cap the climax, Decatur boarded a third enemy gunboat, somewhat smaller than his first prize. Here occurred that famous hand-to-hand combat between Decatur and the gigantic Moorish captain. The devotion of Seaman Daniel Frazier, and his own coolness gave Decatur victory. All but three of the enemy were

killed or wounded before they would surrender. This was real schooling for a young Navy.

Lieutenant Richard Somers, bravest of the brave, had not been able to join Decatur. So single-handed he attacked the five enemy craft west of the entrance. “They still advanced to within pistol-shot,” Somers wrote, “when they wore round and stood for the batteries. I pursued them until in musket shot of the batteries, which kept up a continued fire of round shot and grape.” That was how Somers fought.

The *Constitution's* heavy battery, reënforced by six Neapolitan 29-pounders, had been engaging these same batteries at point-blank range. Several times she was brought within four hundred yards of the rocky coast of which no chart was available. The bomb vessels had launched a quantity of their huge 13-inch shells into the city, but many of them did not explode. At four-thirty the wind shifted and a withdrawal was signaled. Preble covered it in great style. “Tacked ship,” he wrote, “and fired two broadsides in stays, which drove the Tripolitans out of the castle and brought down the steeple of a mosque.” [16]

This three-hour battle had proved highly successful. But do you think the commodore was contented? Admiral Gleaves tells how, after the battle, Decatur came on board the *Constitution* to make his report. Approaching Preble on the quarter-deck, he said: “Sir, I have the honor to report that I have captured three of the enemy’s gunboats.” “Three, Sir!” replied the commodore, “where are the rest of them?” This incident well illustrates the inflexible character of Edward Preble. In his official report, however, he was careful to express complete satisfaction with the manner in which his subordinates had conducted their attacks.

As the summer wore on four more attacks were made. All were conducted with great gallantry. They were not made without loss, for the Tripolitans always gave us a good fight. Pirates though they were, we must give them credit where due. The last attack, conducted at night, was particularly effective. On that occasion, “to draw off the enemy’s attention and amuse them while the bombardment was being kept up,” the *Constitution* fired eleven thunderous broadsides at point-blank range. [17]

In the fall Preble returned home. During his year of command not a court-martial had been ordered nor a duel fought. Among the many

letters of congratulation he received was a unique tribute from the Pope: “The American commander, with a small force and in a short space of time, has done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages.” His countrymen received the returning commodore with every honor. Congress voted him a gold medal. The Navy had again come into its own. And the *Constitution*, now a veteran of five battles, had firmly established her reputation as a lucky and successful ship.

Thus ends the first act of our drama. Eight years pass before the second begins.

ACT II
On the Ocean

SCENE I. THE FIGHT WITH THE GUERRIERE

At last the day has come. Long and eagerly awaited has it been by American seamen. A tall-sparred frigate plows through the purple waters of the Gulf Stream. From her mastheads lookouts report a tiny speck upon the clear horizon. Sharp eyes distinguish it from the far-distant masses of cumulous clouds it counterfeits so well. Larger and larger it grows. It becomes, in fact, another frigate, equally large and beautiful. Across one of her topsails is painted a cryptic phrase, "Not the Little Belt." This may have little meaning to us today. But in the year of our Lord 1812 it was full of grim significance. From her peak flutters a white ensign, barred with red, the proud emblem of the Royal Navy.

On the first ship there is a muffled roll of drums, a brief hurrying of men about the decks, a period of well-ordered activity—then quiet. "Silent is the path of duty for every well-drilled man." Up to her mastheads creep balls of bunting. These at a quiet word of command break out into strips of red and white, stars of white against a blue field—battle ensigns of the United States. *Constitution* and *Guerriere* have met. A great moment of history is at hand.

The famous duel between these two frigates cannot, of course, be compared to the many sea battles between great fleets which have made naval history. But often small events have a far-reaching influence. This fight certainly was one of the most important and decisive single ship actions ever fought.

To show why this was so we must set the scene before we begin the play. To Great Britain, engaged in a death struggle with Napoleon, our little war was nothing more than a side show—of even less importance than the entry of a Balkan nation into the World War struggle. The chief concern of the British statesmen was that it might interfere with the supply of Wellington's army in Spain—a task performed almost exclusively by American merchant vessels. It

never occurred to them that our frigates would put to sea, or, if they should, that they could last long against the British cruisers which literally covered the Seven Seas. Theodore Roosevelt has stated that during the previous twenty years the Royal Navy had fought two hundred single-ship actions where there was approximate equality in power, i.e., neither ship had a superiority of over three to two. In these actions only five British ships had been captured. With such a record of success, it was only natural that the British captains should give scant consideration to our young and comparatively inexperienced Navy.

It is true that the *Constitution* was about 7 per cent larger than the *Guerriere*; that she carried 24-pounder guns against the 18-pounders in the British frigate, thus giving us a ten to seven superiority in weight of metal; and that her sides were very thick, stouter in fact than those of a British ship-of-the-line. But the British captains showed not the slightest concern over these American advantages, which at that time were not considered as such. In fact, it was thought that we had overweighted our ships with guns and timbers so that their speed and handiness were decreased. Captain Dacres of the *Guerriere* had challenged any American frigate to meet him in single combat. He had bet Captain Isaac Hull, so the story goes, a perfectly good hat that he would beat the *Constitution*. Even after the fight Dacres said he would be happy to fight him again with "a frigate of similar force to the *Guerriere*." All the propaganda of our frigates being disguised ships-of-the-line was a much later concoction, disseminated after we had proved in three battles the advantage of our heavier guns and thicker sides, as well as the efficiency of our officers and sailors.

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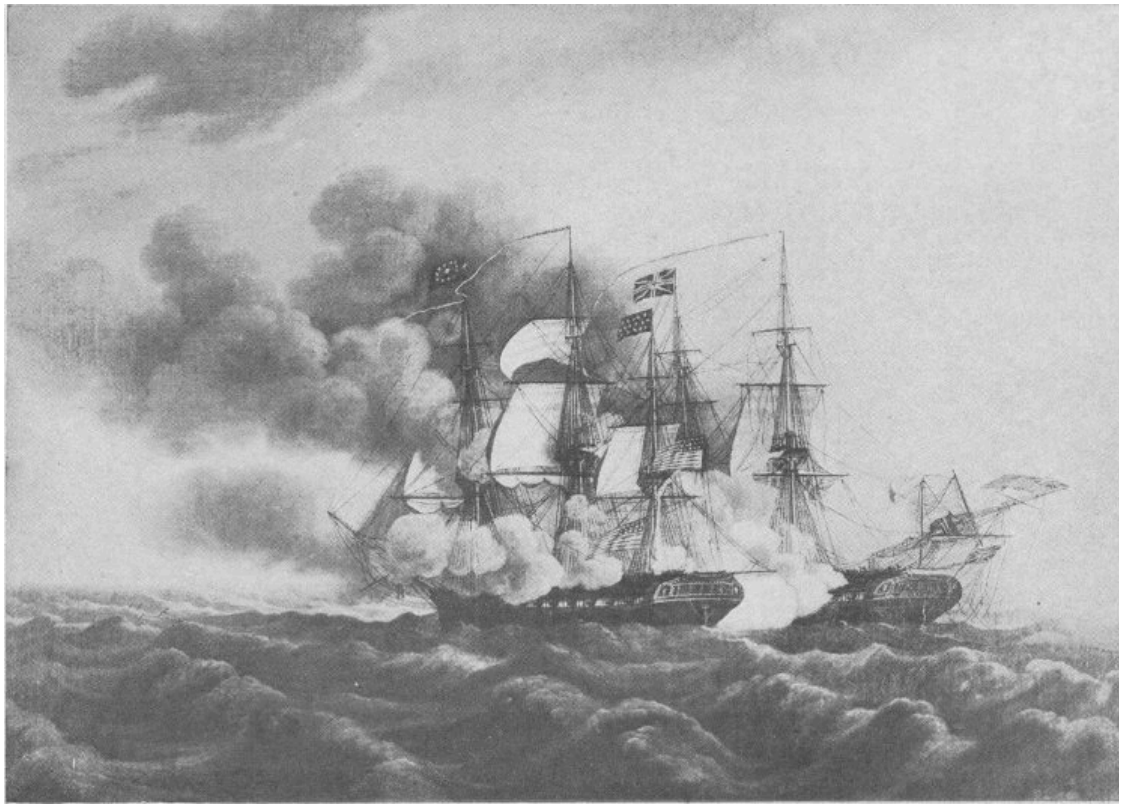
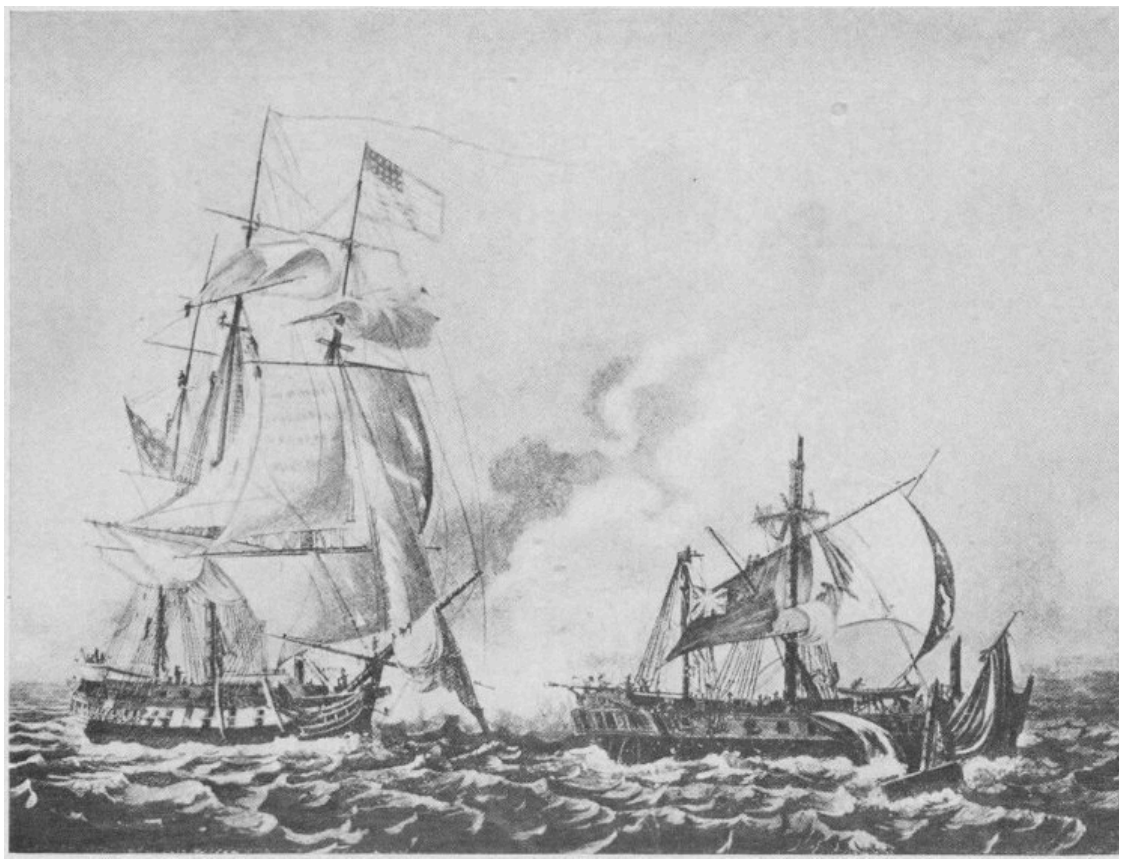
But now let the fight begin. For some hours the *Guerriere* kept away, trying to gain some advantage. But at 6:00 P.M. Dacres decided to end this useless maneuvering and get to business. He headed directly before the wind, decreased sail, and waited for the American frigate. Hull, increasing his sail power, came swiftly down upon him. Zero hour was about to strike. What could Yankee seamen do against the might of Britannia?



From the painting by Thomas Birch
Constitution AND *Guerriere*



Macpherson Collection

Moses Smith, sponger of No. 1 gun, describes how the *Constitution* went into action. "Hull was now all animation. He saw that the decisive moment had come. With great energy, yet calmness of manner, he passed around among the officers and men, addressing to them words of confidence and encouragement. 'Men,' said he, 'now do your duty. Your officers cannot have entire control over you now. Each man must do all in his power for his country.' The Stars and Stripes never floated more proudly than they did at that moment. All was silent beneath them, save the occasional order from an officer, or the low sound of the movement of our implements of war. *Every man stood firm to his post.*" 21

By 6:05 the Constitution was two hundred yards on the *Guerriere's* port quarter. Hull then yawed his ship's head slightly away from the enemy and threw his broadside full upon her. As the guns bore on the target they fired in rapid succession. "We instantly followed the thunder of our cannon with three loud cheers, which rang along the ship like the roar of waters, and floated away rapidly to the ears of the enemy."

The cannonading was terrific. Our gunners, in the heat of battle, looked well to their aim. By 6:20 the *Constitution* was abreast the British frigate, distant one hundred yards. Then with a splintering crash came down Dacres' mizzenmast. "Huzza, boys! We've made a brig of her!" The mast, with its tangle of sails and rigging, dragged in the water and checked the *Guerriere's* headway. Here was Hull's chance, and he was not the man to miss it. Spinning his wheel to the right, he charged across his enemy's bow. Those terrible 24's raked her with great effect. As the *Constitution* shot past and her guns would no longer bear there was a brief lull in the fight. Seaman Daniel Hogan climbed to the dizzy height of the fore truck to replace the battle ensign which had been shot away.

Hull wore his ship and again headed across the bow of the almost unmanageable *Guerriere*. His gunners had moved across the deck and cast loose the port guns. Again they raked the British frigate. But this time Hull had come a bit too close. The ships came together. Boarders were called away. A storm of musketry broke out. Sharpshooters in the tops fired down on the crowded decks. Lieutenant William Bush of the Marines fell dead. Lieutenant 22

Charles Morris, who first had scaled the *Philadelphia's* side, was severely wounded. So also was Sailing Master John Aylwin, a brave and skillful officer. At 6:30 the ships came clear. And then the *Guerriere's* foremasts and mainmasts plunged over her side. Twenty-five minutes had sufficed for Yankee gunners to dismast a British frigate.

Seeing that the fight was won, Hull hauled off to repair his rigging. He must be prepared for another enemy if one should appear. At 7:00 he returned to receive the surrender of Captain Dacres. The prize was so completely wrecked that there was no hope of bringing her into port. After her crew had been taken off, she was set on fire. From the *Constitution's* quarter-deck Captain Dacres watched. At length her magazine exploded and she disappeared beneath the waters. A sad omen it must have seemed to the British captain. A new sea power had arrived!

That this was fully appreciated is shown by an article in the London *Times*. "It is not merely that an English frigate has been taken, after, what we are free to confess may be called a brave resistance, but that it has been taken by a new enemy, an enemy unaccustomed to such triumphs, and likely to be rendered insolent and confident by them. He must be a weak politician who does not see how important the first triumph is in giving a tone and character to the war. Never before in the history of the world did an English frigate strike to an American."

In our country the effect was magical. Where before political strife, sectional differences, and commercial rivalries combined to bring our people to the verge of civil war and secession, now a wave of wildest enthusiasm spread like a forest fire. For here was a deed of which every man and woman from Maine to Louisiana might be proud. "Thank God for Hull's victory" was a watchword which passed from state to state. It gave impetus to naval operations and fired our captains with impatience to get to sea and bring the enemy under their guns. It encouraged swarms of privateers to cover the Seven Seas and attack the enemy's vital trade routes.

Admiral Sir John Jervis is reported to have said to his flag captain as he sighted the Spanish fleet off Cape St. Vincent that a victory was very necessary to England at that moment. With equal justice Isaac Hull might have made a similar remark on sighting the *Guerriere*. Our country needed a victory then as it never had before nor has since. Napoleon said that in war the moral is to the physical as three

to one; in this case it was many times more. The mere sinking of a frigate meant nothing to England. But the fact that it was sunk by an American frigate at the cost of only fourteen casualties meant a great deal to England, and to our United States. What had been done once could be done again!

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SCENE II. AND NOW FOR THE "JAVA"

While the *Constitution* was taking a little rest in Boston Stephen Decatur in the sister-ship *United States* had taken the sea. In the latter part of October he encountered the British frigate *Macedonian*, likewise a sister-ship of the *Guerriere*. So the scene was set exactly as in the previous battle. But, whereas Hull had decided the issue by sheer overpowering force at point-blank range, Decatur fought a distant battle in an effort to capitalize to the full his superiority in gunnery and seamanship. He won his fight at the cost of only eleven casualties. In ninety minutes his gunners had put a hundred shot into the *Macedonian's* hull and killed or wounded one hundred and four of her crew. This time the prize was brought safely into port. Here was a convincing confirmation of American naval efficiency.

By the time this fight had been won the *Constitution* was again at sea. This time she was commanded by William Bainbridge, the unlucky officer who had lost the *Philadelphia* off Tripoli. But now he was in a luckier ship. Soon fortune sent a fine British frigate into his arms. This happened on December 29 off Bahia on the coast of Brazil.

The *Java* was considerably more powerful than the other British frigates previously captured. She was commanded by an excellent officer, Captain Lambert. In weight of metal she was inferior to the *Constitution* only as nine to ten. Neither captain had any idea of dodging the issue. Each made ready to fight to the finish. Fighting topsails were spread. Battle ensigns decorated every masthead. At 2:10 P.M. the battle began. At first the range was long. But in a few minutes the ships were in to two hundred yards. Then the real business of the day began. It was as finely contested a frigate action as ever was fought. Both Bainbridge and Lambert maneuvered their ships with masterly skill. First one ship would gain an advantageous position, then the other. Like two skilled wrestlers, each in turn gained a hold, only to have it broken by his opponent.

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All this time the guns' crews were fast at work, rushing from one battery to the other as their captains tacked and wore. It was work, hard and grim—hauling at the gun tackles, ramming home powder and shot, and slewing around the clumsy gun carriages to point the guns squarely at the enemy. Acrid smoke clouds swept along the decks and clouds of splinters flew around.

For a time the action is very closely fought. But, barring a lucky accident, the issue is really never in doubt. For Yankee gunners are incomparable and they have *iron sides* to protect them—twenty inches of stout oak beams. They cannot be beaten in such a ship. Slowly but surely our superiority in gunnery wears down the enemy. One after another the *Java's* tall spars crash down. Heroic Lambert fights well but is killed. Lieutenant Chads, already wounded, takes command. Half his crew is killed or wounded. Still he fights.

The *Constitution* also has her losses. Bainbridge himself is severely wounded, but he still keeps the deck. Brave Aylwin, who already wears a wound stripe for the *Guerriere* battle, is again shot down. This will be the last fight for him. Well, he will live long enough to see a second British frigate lower her battle flags. Over thirty others lie dead or wounded about the decks or under the surgeon's knife in the cockpit. British frigates cannot be taken without losing men.

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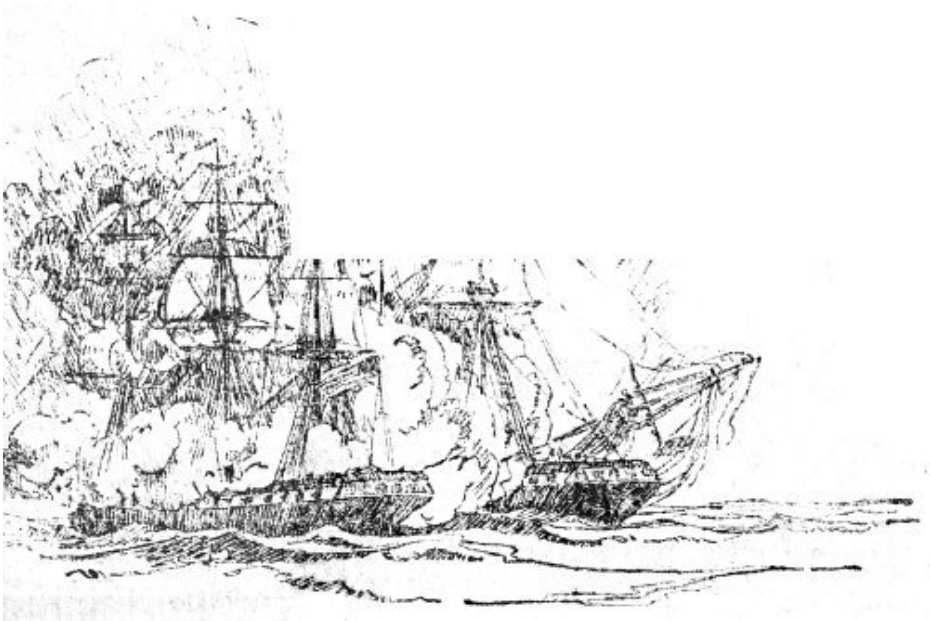
For two long hours the battle rages. Chads does well but he cannot do the impossible. Finally the *Java* must give in. Here is a fight in which there is honor enough for all, vanquished as well as victor. And Bainbridge, after such buffets of fate as few have received, at

last has won his well-deserved victory. A third British frigate had been taken.

When “Old Ironsides” reached Boston a great reception awaited the commodore. There he marched through the streets, arm in arm with Rodgers and Hull—three commodores of whom any country might be proud. Fifes and drums played *Yankee-Doodle* as the procession moved through the streets. It was a big Navy Day!

SCENE III. THE LAST FIGHT

The *Constitution* took a long rest after this battle. The *Java's* shot had discovered some rotten spots in her sides. A long overhaul was required to make her again ready for sea. Meanwhile the Navy had won many a victory and had suffered some defeats. Our little sloops-of-war won a long succession of splendid successes. Gallant James Lawrence, hero of the *Hornet-Peacock* fight, lost the *Chesapeake* to the British frigate *Shannon*—crying, as he lay dying, “Don’t give up the ship!” Sewing this motto on his blue battle flag Perry annihilated the British squadron on Lake Erie. Macdonough saved the northern frontier with a complete victory on Lake Champlain, which a British marine thought more desperately fought than Trafalgar. 27
Our privateers were gathering in their prizes on every sea in constantly increasing numbers and sending the insurance rates three times higher than all previous levels.



But the war could not well end without a third victory by the *Constitution*. Now she was commanded by Charles Stewart, a worthy successor to Hull and Bainbridge. On February 20, 1815, north of Madeira, the American frigate came in contact with the British corvette *Cyane*, thirty-four guns, and the sloop *Levant*, twenty-one. Their fifty-five guns threw a slightly heavier weight of metal, but their armament consisted mostly of short-range carronades which could not be compared with the terrible long 24's which filled the *Constitution's* gun-deck ports. Still the two Britons formed column and accepted Stewart's challenge.

Stewart might have fought at long range where the British carronades could not have reached him. But night was coming on, and, if he were to take both ships, there was no time to waste. "At five minutes past six," he wrote, "ranged up on the starboard side of the sternmost ship, about three hundred yards distant, and commenced the action by broadsides, both ships returning our fire with the greatest spirit for about fifteen minutes." Stewart's tactics have a lesson: When you are anxious to engage and night is approaching, do not try to get all the conditions in your favor. Take things as they are and fight in the most decisive manner. Otherwise you will never capture your *Cyane* and *Levant*. Perhaps we have here a lesson for the battles of peace as well as those of war. 28

After this first engagement smoke clouds obscured the range and fire ceased. But not for long, for now the *Constitution* began a series of beautiful maneuvers—raking each enemy ship in turn. They separated and made off. Stewart hung close to the *Cyane* and soon forced her to surrender. By eight o'clock she had been manned by a prize crew. Stewart started in search of the *Levant*.

Captain Douglass of the *Levant* had now repaired his damages. Instead of trying to escape, he sailed back to assist his comrade. But he was too late. At eight-thirty he ran into the *Constitution*. Attempts to escape proved futile and at ten the second prize was made. "At 1:00 A.M.," Stewart reported, "the damages to our rigging had been repaired, sails shifted, and the ship in fighting condition." The price of this double victory was only fifteen casualties.

The *Cyane* safely reached home. The *Levant* was recaptured by a British squadron in a neutral port. The *Constitution* received her last battle triumph in New York many months after peace had been signed. She had fought her last fight. But for many long years she

served her country well by showing the flag in every part of the world. After that she trained many classes of midshipmen at the Naval Academy. Now her useful labors are ended but she serves a still more important purpose. For this old hulk, whose iron sides protected iron men, is an inspiration to every officer and man in the naval service—and to every American.

Courtesy U. S. Naval Academy
From an engraving by Sartain, after the original painting by Thomas Birch
THE NIGHT BATTLE BETWEEN THE U.S.S. *Constitution* AND H. M. SHIPS *Cyane* AND *Levant*
On the left is the corvette *Cyane*, in the center the frigate *Constitution*, and on the right the sloop *Levant*. The *Constitution* captured both vessels.

From an engraving by Henry Meyer after the original painting by John W. Jarvis
STEPHEN DECATUR

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EPILOGUE

Scarce one tall frigate walks the sea
Or skirts the safer shores
Of all that bore to victory
Our stout old Commodores.

So wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1865. Many years have passed since then. Again a tall frigate walks the sea. She carries a message from many a stout old commodore, many an alert topman, many a keen-eyed gunner. In fact, she carries a message from our Navy to our People.

All the stories of "Old Ironsides" in this little pamphlet are based on chapters of *We Build a Navy*, by Commander H. H. Frost, U. S. Navy, published by U. S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland.

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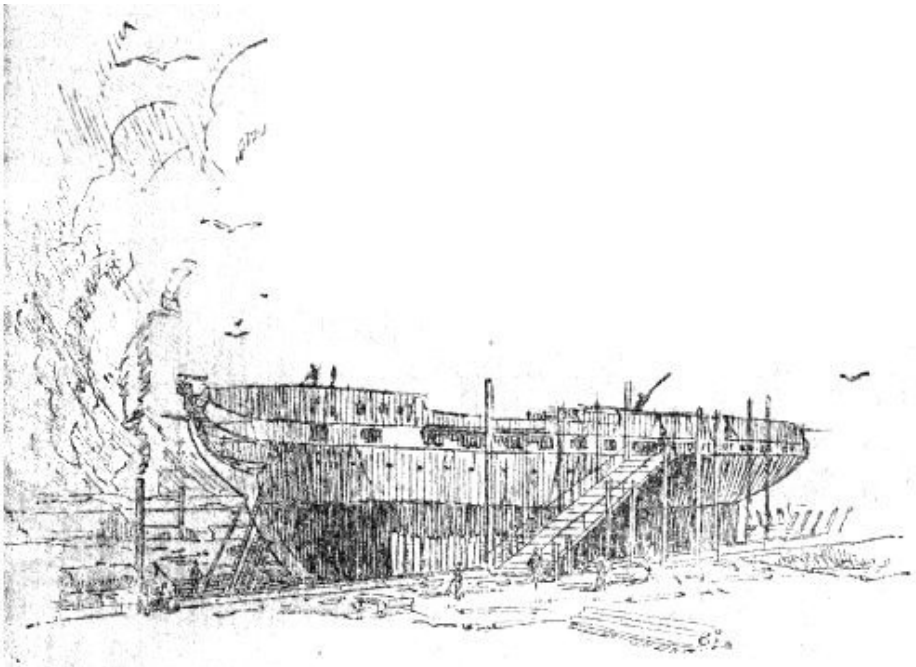
Information about the "Constitution"

The building of the *Constitution* resulted from the failure of the new United States government to purchase protection from the Algerian pirates. By a majority of two, the House of Representatives voted, in March, 1794, to provide six frigates that "separately would be superior to any European frigate." The *Constitution* was one of these. She was designed by Joshua Humphreys of Philadelphia and built at Hartt's Wharf in Boston, near the present Constitution Wharf. The copper bolts and fittings were supplied by Paul Revere. Construction was all but abandoned after a new treaty was made with the pirates, but the insistence of Presidents Washington and Adams, coupled with the rising difficulties with revolutionary France, finally brought the work to completion. She was launched in October, 1797, and commissioned quickly.



The *Constitution* was rated as a 44-gun frigate but has carried as many as 55 guns at various times. The present arrangement closely follows that of her early days. The guns on the spar deck are 32-pounder carronades, short, light guns which threw heavy shots a short distance (300 to 400 yards). On the gun deck are long 24-

pounders, heavy guns with much greater range but less smashing power than the carronade. In the following table the ranges given are for one degree of elevation. The long gun could attain ranges up to 2,000 yards by greater elevation, the projectile leaving the gun with a velocity of about 1,500 feet per second.

The *Constitution* cost $302,917. Her original dimensions were: 31
length over-all, 204 feet; beam, 43.5 feet; draft, forward 21 feet, aft 23 feet; displacement 2,200 tons. She was generally considered an excellent sailer, the report being that "she works within eleven points of the wind; steers, works, sails, scuds, and lies-to well; rolls deep and easy, and sailing close-hauled has beaten everything sailed with."

Guns of the Constitution

Location	Type	No.	Length	Weight lbs.	Bore inches	Powder charge	Approx. range
Gun deck, for'd. and aft	24-pdr., American	12	9′ 5¾″	5,135	5.824	8 lbs.	700 yds.
Gun deck, amidships	24-pdr., English	18	10′ 5¾″	5,733	5.824	8 lbs.	700 yds.
Spar deck	32-pdr., carronades	20	5′ 5″	2,240	6.41	4 lbs.	400 yds.
Spar deck, bow chasers	24-pdr.	2	9′ 9½″	4,170	5.824	8 lbs.	700 yds.

The two bow chasers are 18-pounders bored for 24-pound shot. They are lighter than the standard 24-pounder to reduce top weights. Total weight of broadside, 734 pounds. As shot were frequently underweight, this figure is not exact.

Her complement was 400 officers and men, but she usually cruised with about 50 men in excess. At sea the men were crowded closely together and there was much sickness. The ration was fixed by law and it made a monotonous diet. The legal ration for Sunday was 1½ lbs. beef, 14 oz. bread, ½ lb. flour, ¼ lb. suet, ½ pt. spirits. On week days pork was sometimes substituted for beef, with cheese or dried

peas in place of suet. The meat was usually salted, the bread stale and moldy, the spirits good.

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