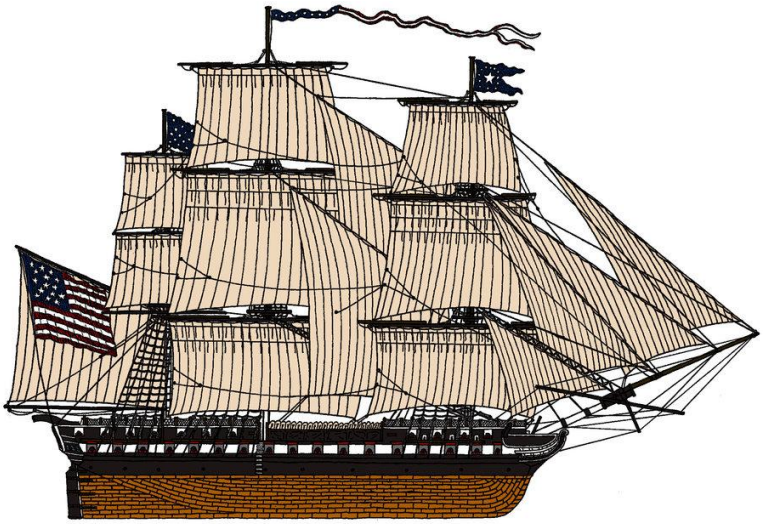
USS Constitution: The Legendary Survivor



Of the numerous ships that have added to the laurels of the United States Navy since its official inception more than two centuries ago, a handful stand out, both for their individual deeds and for their ability to epitomize the era in which they earned their fame. Of those, arguably the most famous is the frigate Constitution. Besides achieving renown in several actions during the War of 1812, USS Constitution managed to endure to the present day, despite some close brushes with destruction–the last of which was at the hands of her own navy.

Constitution‘s very genesis coincided with that of the U.S. Navy itself. The naval phase of the War of American Independence had been carried out by a combination of state fleets, privateers and a relatively small Continental navy. Notwithstanding some noteworthy successes, the Americans had suffered near-crippling losses at the hands of Britain’s Royal Navy by the time American independence was achieved in 1783. In 1785, the last of the few surviving Continental warships were sold off, leaving the newborn United States with no navy at all.

Following the War of Independence, President George Washington and most congressmen favored a policy of noninvolvement in world affairs. It soon became clear, however, that the world would not cooperate. Pirates, operating from the North African Barbary states, such as Tripoli and Algiers, regularly intercepted American merchant ships plying the Mediterranean and demanded tribute (i.e., extortion money) from their crews, with seizure of ships and cargoes as the alternative. In the Atlantic, British warships regularly stopped American ships and searched

them for deserters from the Royal Navy–often impressing American citizens into service along with the legitimate fugitives.

After years of enduring such humiliations, in March 1794 a reluctant U.S. Congress authorized the construction of six large frigates as the nucleus of a new navy. Like light cruisers or destroyers of a later century, frigates served as fast scouts and versatile utility vessels for the fleets of such major sea powers as Britain, France and Spain. Ill-disposed toward expenditure on larger vessels, the Americans settled for compensating as best they could with frigates that would be somewhat larger, faster and more heavily armed than their foreign counterparts–in essence, ships capable of outgunning whatever enemy they could not outrun and outrunning any that they could not outgun.

The basic design of the new frigates was conceived by Joshua Humphreys, an experienced Quaker shipbuilder from Philadelphia. Construction was carried out at different seaports throughout the country. Two of the ships, Chesapeake and Congress, were to carry 36 guns and were built in Norfolk and Portsmouth, respectively. A third, the 38-gun Constellation, was built in Baltimore. The heavy hitters of the new fleet, however, were the three frigates of the President class, each displacing 1,576 tons and mounting 44 guns. Of those, President was built in New York, United States in Philadelphia and Constitution in Boston.

Launched in October 1797 and completed the following summer, Constitution was soon put to work patrolling the West Indies against French commerce raiders during an undeclared 'quasi-war' between the United States and Revolutionary France. From 1800 to 1803, Constitution and her sisters were recalled to port and held 'in ordinary,' in accordance with the isolationist policy fostered by President Thomas Jefferson. On September 12, 1803, however, Constitution arrived off the Barbary Coast to confront the Tripolitan pirates. The war with the Barbary pirates ultimately ended with a treaty, signed aboard Constitution on June 10, 1805, granting American ships passage through the Mediterranean without further payments of tribute. The conflict's outcome set a precedent for similar free passage for other nations, and served notice that the United States was prepared to fight to protect its interests abroad as well as at home, if necessary.

Meanwhile, relations between the United States and Great Britain were deteriorating. On June 22, 1807, the British frigate Leopard accosted Chesapeake off Hampton Roads, Va., demanding to 'stop and inspect' the American frigate for deserters. When Chesapeake's captain, Commodore Samuel Barron, refused, Leopard fired a broadside, inflicting 23 casualties. Barron struck his colors, and without even acknowledging the surrender, Leopard's captain boarded Chesapeake and interned four of her crew. Two of the men were indeed deserters, one of whom, William Ware, was left to die of his injuries; the other, Jenkin Ratford, was hanged. The other two prisoners, Americans Daniel Martin and John Strachen, were sentenced to receive 500

lashes, but a strong appeal from President Jefferson persuaded the British to return them to their ship with a token apology.

The Chesapeake affair marked the start of a downward spiral to war. On May 1, 1811, the British Guerrière, a frigate that had been captured from the French in 1806 and was now under the command of Captain James Richard Dacres, stopped and boarded the American brig Spitfire off Sandy Hook, N.J., and made off with an American passenger named John Deguyo. The United States responded by dispatching the frigate President, commanded by Captain John Rodgers, to intercept Guerrière and recover Deguyo. On the night of May 16, Rodgers encountered a British ship and, assuming her to be Guerrière, demanded that she stop and be boarded. It is not certain who fired the first shot, but an exchange of cannon fire broke out, resulting in the British ship's being disabled several minutes later. At daybreak, however, Rodgers learned that his victim was in fact the 22-gun sloop Little Belt, which had lost 11 men dead and 21 wounded in the unequal fight. It is not known whether or not Rodgers apologized, but he did offer assistance to Little Belt, which her captain angrily declined.

As Little Belt limped home, it was the turn of the British public to be outraged, especially when it became known that Rodgers was being viewed at home as more of a hero than a blunderer. By the autumn of 1811, more than 6,000 cases of American citizens' being impressed had been registered in Washington, of which number the British themselves admitted to 3,000.

While American and British diplomats argued, relations between the United States and Napoleon Bonaparte's French empire improved, and American merchant ships defied Britain's blockade to trade in French ports. In Washington, a growing faction of 'young war hawks' called for war with Britain and even the invasion and assimilation of Canada into the United States. Finally, on June 19, 1812, Congress declared war on Great Britain.

The conflict that Americans would call the War of 1812 found the U.S. Navy pitting a total of 17 seagoing warships against the 219 ships of the line and 296 frigates at the Royal Navy's disposal. For the British, the American War, as they called it, represented no more than a quaint sideshow to their global struggle against Napoleon. Just a relative handful of their warships, the British reasoned, would suffice to sweep the upstart Yankees from the seas.

Constitution was made operational just days before war was declared. In mid-June 1810 she had returned from Mediterranean service, and Isaac Hull, a portly seadog from Derby, Conn., who had worked his way up from cabin boy to captain, took command of the big frigate. Soon afterward, Hull noticed that Constitution's speed and handling were not all that he expected and had divers go below to investigate. What they found was an estimated 10 wagonloads of oysters, mussels, barnacles and weeds hanging off her coppered bottom 'like bunches of grapes,' as Hull described it. Hull sailed Constitution to Chesapeake Bay, hoping the fresh water would kill some

of the Mediterranean organisms, then removed the rest by dragging an iron scraper of his own invention back and forth along her bottom. In April 1812, he laid her up in the Washington Navy Yard to have her bottom recoppered, where he learned that there was only enough metal available to patch it partially. Satisfied that his frigate had at least been restored to a semblance of competitive performance, Hull took the additional step of replacing a number of the 42-pound carronades on her spar deck with lighter and less potent but longer-range 32-pound cannons.

On June 18, Constitution was out of the yard and taking on stores in Alexandria, Va., when Hull received a message from Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, advising him of the imminence of war and instructing him to join Commodore John Rodgers' five-ship squadron in the Atlantic. Sailing to Annapolis, Hull prepared his ship for a long voyage and took on new recruits, carefully assessing each man's experience. He also took some time out on July 4 to mark his country's Independence Day with a salute from Constitution's guns before departing Annapolis the next morning for New York, where Rodgers' squadron was supposed to be.

While Hull was making his preparations to join him, Rodgers had already left New York, hoping to intercept a 100-ship merchant convoy reported to be en route from Jamaica to England. Rodgers never found the convoy, but on June 23 he encountered the British frigate Belvidera. As the British ship fled to the northeast, Rodgers fired the first cannon shot of the war from President's bow chaser. Three hits inflicted nine casualties aboard Belvidera, but when a cannon on President's main deck was fired once more, it burst and ignited the 'passing box' used for bringing gunpowder up from the magazine. Among the 16 Americans killed or injured by the resulting blast was Rodgers, who was blown skyward off the forecastle deck and came down with a broken leg.

Supported by his officers, Rodgers ignored the pain of his injury and continued to direct the pursuit, but with President's bow demolished, it was necessary to yaw the ship to bring her broadsides into play against Belvidera. That evening, Belvidera's captain, Richard Byron, ordered his ship's anchors, many of her boats and most of her food and water cast overboard. Thus lightened, Belvidera was able to leave President behind.

Three days later, Belvidera reached Halifax, Nova Scotia, the principal British naval base in North America, and Byron reported his close brush with Rodgers to his squadron commander, Captain Philip Bowes Vere Broke. Reacting to the news that the Americans were operating in squadron strength, Broke recalled three lone British warships that were patrolling the American coast, and on July 5 (the same day that Constitution left Annapolis), Broke led his squadron out of Halifax to help establish a blockade of American coastal waters and, if possible, engage Rodgers' force. On July 15, Broke's squadron ran into the American 14-gun brig Nautilus and promptly captured her, renaming her HMS Emulous. The British then continued their patrol, and

on the following day they spotted another ship on the horizon, following an eastward tack 12 miles off Cape Barnegat, N.J.

The ship that approached the British that afternoon was none other than Constitution, whose lookout informed Captain Hull at 2 that afternoon of the discovery of four ships on the horizon to the northwest, as well as a fifth vessel, a frigate, coming from the northeast. Rodgers' squadron was comprised of five ships–the frigates President, United States and Congress, the sloop of war Hornet and the brig Argus–but to Hull, such a timely encounter seemed too good to be true, so he prudently chose a slow and careful approach until he was sure that the ships were indeed American.

Although a fresh breeze was blowing from the northeast, at 3 p.m. Hull decided that he was getting too near the coast and therefore took an opposite tack, sailing due east, with the lone unidentified frigate following him from a discrete distance. At 10 that night, the frigate closed to signaling distance–six to eight miles–and Hull ran up a prearranged sequence of lights that would identify his ship to Rodgers. When no reply was forthcoming, Hull realized that his misgivings were justified; whatever those five ships were, they were not from Rodgers' squadron.

Constitution and the unknown frigate maintained their guarded parallel courses until daybreak on July 17, when a visual sighting at last confirmed Hull's misgivings. All the unidentified ships–a ship of the line and four frigates accompanied by a brig and a schooner–were flying British colors.

The principal warships in the far group were, in fact, the 64-gun man-of-war Africa and three frigates–the 32-gun Aeolis, the 36-gunBelvidera and Broke's flagship, the 38-gun Shannon, as well as the recently acquired brig Emulous. As for the nearer frigate that had been shadowing Constitution all night, she was the 38-gun Guerrière.

At that point, the serendipity of the encounter was Broke's, not Hull's. As a prize, Nautilus was small fry to the British commander; but now the 44-gun Constitution, one of the three most powerful ships in the U.S. Navy, was his for the taking. Hull, for his part, judged discretion the better part of valor and headed Constitution south as fast as the feeble wind would carry her. Guerrière wasted 10 to 15 minutes wearing and tacking, allowing Constitution to slip out of the range of her guns and put some precious distance between herself and her pursuers before the hunt began in earnest.

Constitution was now involved in a race for survival, although it would not have seemed so to an outside observer if he judged it on speed alone. The weather was clear, but the wind remained slight all day and throughout the night. At 5 the next morning even that breeze died, fixing Constitution in a state of limbo while her enemies slowly began to overtake her. At 5:15, Hull

lowered a cutter and soon had his other boats engaged in towing his ship forward. What followed was among the strangest, and certainly one of the most agonizingly slow, sea chases in history.

As the prospect of contact with the British became imminent, Hull had one of Constitution's 24-pounders brought up from the main deck to the quarterdeck and an 18-pounder brought aft from the forecastle, while a portion of the taffrail was cut away to accommodate it. Two more guns were run out of the stern window, giving Constitution a total of four stern chasers. The frigate then set her topgallant studding sails and staysails, while hammocks were removed from their nettings, and any cloth other than the sails was rolled up to streamline the ship as much as possible in the event of the wind's returning.

By then the British, too, were becalmed. At 5:45, Belvidera's Captain Byron saw Constitution slowly drawing away and figured out what Hull was up to. He, too, sent his boats ahead to tow, and soon the other British ships were doing the same. The pursuit of Constitution now became a strenuous rowing and towing match; one for which Broke's frigates held the advantage, since they were lighter than the 'overbuilt' Constitution, and their hulls produced less drag for their crewmen to overcome as they strained at the oars. Moreover, at 8 Broke ordered most, if not all, of the other ships' boats to be put at Shannon's disposal and had all the sails of his flagship furled.

With her speed raised to as much as 3 knots, Shannon soon lay off Constitution's port bow, tantalizingly close to gun range, but just then a light breeze arose. Hull, who had taken the trouble to have buckets of sea water hoisted and poured over his sails to render them less porous, was able to take the greater advantage of it, leaving Shannon behind while Constitution's own boats rowed frantically to keep up with her.

In 30 minutes, Constitution increased her lead on Broke's ships by a few hundred yards, but then the wind failed again. Soon Shannon's straining boatmen had drawn her back within striking range, and she was taking a few test shots with her bow chasers. Some of the projectiles passed over Constitution.

At that critical juncture, one of Hull's officers, Lieutenant Charles Morris, suggested a technique that he had used in the past to make his way out of windless harbors–kedging, which involved rowing an anchor ahead of the ship, dropping it and then having, the crew haul the ship along by the hawser. Hull sounded the water and, on finding it to be 26 fathoms (156 feet) deep, agreed to give Morris' idea a try. All nonessential ropes were spliced into a line nearly a mile long. One end was tied to a small, sharp-fluked kedging anchor, which was then rowed ahead in the ship's cutter.

When the anchor was dropped, Constitution‘s crew grabbed the hawser and walked aft–slowly and gingerly at first, then gradually increasing the pace as the ship began to move. Each crewman who reached the stern let go of the line and raced forward to pull anew. Meanwhile, more rope was spliced and another anchor attached, so that while Constitution was being kedged along on one anchor, the second could be hauled ahead. Hull lost some distance on the British while improvising his kedging arrangements, but once the laborious process got underway, he found Constitution beginning to leave Shannon behind again. In what for him was a rare fit of overconfidence, Hull ordered his ship’s colors hoisted high and a stern chaser fired a cocky farewell salute to his would-be captors. It did not take long, however, before Captain Byron again figured out how the Americans had increased their speed and signaled it to Broke. Soon, British crews were hauling away at their own kedging lines.

At 9:09, a light breeze sprang up from the south, and Hull skillfully caught it on the port tack. At the same time, Hull pulled his boats up on davits, or on temporary tackles rigged to various spars, with the crews still in them, ready to be lowered and take to their oars at minimum notice. As Hull had anticipated, at 10 the wind died again, and the boats were lowered. Gripping the kedging hawsers, the crews of both ships–hunters and hunted–plodded their way aft silently, their purpose too earnest to warrant the rhythmic shanties that normally accompanied their labors.

On the British side, it was now Belvidera that was given the extra boats, advancing by both kedging and the continued towing efforts of her boats’ crews. As she slowly but visibly advanced

on Constitution, Hull tried to lighten his ship by pumping 2,335 gallons of fresh water overboard. At 1:35 p.m., Byron thought he had narrowed the range enough to fire, to which Constitution answered with a volley from her stern chasers. All shots fell short of their targets, however, and both ships subsequently curtailed the futile gunplay.

For the rest of the afternoon and early evening of July 18, the bizarre chase continued. At 7 p.m. Hull lowered three boats to give his ship a complementary tow while the kedging proceeded. At 10:53 a fresh, southerly breeze arose, and Constitution set her fore-topmast staysail and main topgallant studding sail to catch it. At the same time, Hull hastily picked up his boats to prevent their falling behind and into the hands of the British–and to give his crew a much-needed rest.

At midnight the breeze died again, but this time, almost by unspoken mutual agreement, Hull and his British counterparts decided to give their exhausted crews some additional time to regain their strength. A few optimists caught some snatches of sleep, though none strayed far from their assigned posts. At 2 a.m. on July 19, the towing and kedging resumed, and the ships glided silently on at their snail's pace through the darkness.

By sunrise, Belvidera had advanced to a threatening position off Constitution's lee beam when a renewal of the wind offered the Yankees another reprieve. Hull tacked away from Belvidera only to find himself coming within firing range of Aeolis, which had also managed to narrow the distance from the opposite side of the American frigate. Much to Hull's relief, however, Aeolis did not fire a shot, and Constitution was again able to make her way out of danger. By noon the breeze slackened, but remained sufficient for Constitution to increase the distance between herself and the leading British vessel, Belvidera, to four miles.

At 6:30 p.m. Hull noticed a summer rain squall approaching. Although a heavy squall was capable of tearing away a yard or a topmast, Hull judged the coming storm to be relatively light–and therein, he thought, lay a stratagem. Recalling that the British had copied every trick he had employed to stay ahead of them up to that time, he decided on a feigned tactic. As the storm closed in, Hull ordered his heavy canvas secured, a double reef put in the mizzen topsail and his light canvas taken in. As Hull expected, the British observed his precautions and followed suit, also turning their ships in the opposite direction of Constitution's flight in order to face the coming blow bows-on.

When the rain squall finally overtook his ship, obscuring it from the eyes of the British, Hull ordered as many sails set as possible with all the alacrity his tired crew could muster. His calculated risk paid off; the storm was not heavy enough to damage his sails or rigging, but its winds were brisk enough to propel Constitution ahead at 11 knots before blowing over 45 minutes later.

By the time the British realized they had been hoodwinked, Constitution lay close to the horizon and was making steady progress away from them. Unfurling all sails, Broke's ships tenaciously kept up their pursuit through the night, but by 8 a.m. on the 20th,Constitution's sails could barely be seen as she slipped away to the southwest. Ordering his crews to stand down, Broke finally gave up the chase after 66 hours and 30 minutes of tense pursuit.

Hull was probably congratulating himself on having had Constitution's bottom cleaned, but he made no secret of what a near thing it had been, noting, '… had they taken advantage of their early proximity and crippled me when in gunshot range, the outcome might have been different.' As it was, Constitution's hairbreadth escape represented a remarkable achievement of resourcefulness, coolness and discipline by a crew that had only mustered five days before she put to sea. That she had managed to outwit and outrun an entire squadron of His Majesty's ships was a sobering blow to British pride. And Broke's squadron could not have let a more troublesome adversary escape, as subsequent events would prove.

After doubling back north and arriving in Boston on July 26, Constitution left her home port on August 2 and patrolled off Halifax, during which time she captured two British merchant brigs on August 10 and 11. On the 15th she encountered Adeline, an American brig that had been captured by a British sloop and placed under a prize crew. Following Adeline's recapture by Constitution, Hull learned from her crew that Broke's squadron was in the vicinity and prudently set course for Bermuda. On the night of August 17,Constitution met the privateer Decatur, whose captain, William Nichols, told Hull of a lone British man-of-war not far to the south. Shortly afterward, off Sandy Hook, N.J., Constitution encountered the enemy ship, which turned out to be one of her pursuers of the previous month–Guerrière, whose Captain Dacres had reportedly challenged Captain Rodgers in President, 'or any other American frigate,' to meet him for 'a few minutes tête-à-tête.' Dacres had Guerrière's topsails painted with a slogan referring to USS President's victim of 1811–'THIS IS NOT THE LITTLE BELT'–when Constitution closed to accept his challenge.

Dacres got the duel he wanted but not the outcome he expected. After 45 minutes of maneuvering for position, combat commenced with Guerrière's guns volleying relentlessly at the American's rigging while Hull held his fire and closed bows-on to present the smallest target possible. Finally, as Constitution drew abreast of her opponent at a range of 25 yards, Hull cried, 'Now, boys, pour it into them!' The stout American captain's trousers split with the force of his abrupt command while his gunners hurled a full broadside of double shot and grape into the British frigate. Guerrière's crew never recovered from the shock of that first crippling salvo, and after half an hour their ship was a battered and dismasted hulk. When Guerrière fired a gun to leeward as a signal of surrender, Hull backed off for half an hour to effect repairs to his own damaged spars and rigging before returning to accept Dacres' formal surrender.

The officer whom Hull sent aboard Guerrière, Lieutenant George Read, found her beyond salvaging, with 30 holes below the waterline and her decks already awash. Of her crew of 302, there were 101 casualties, including Dacres, wounded in the back by a musket ball while urging his crew to fight on. Dacres accepted Read's offer to put Constitution's surgeon at his disposal, but added that he might be too busy with his own patients. 'Oh, no,' replied Read. 'We have only seven wounded, and they were tended to long ago.' In addition, Constitution had suffered only seven dead out of her 456-man crew.

***Engagement between the U.S. Frigate* Constitution *and H.M.S.* Guerriere**

Hull and Dacres had met several times before the war. After helping the wounded British captain aboard Constitution, Hull gently declined the token of his sword in surrender, saying, 'No, no, I will not take the sword from one who knows so well how to use it.' Before having Guerrière blown up, Hull saw to it that a Bible, which Dacres had been given by his mother, was recovered for him. 'The conduct of Captain Hull and his officers to our men has been that of a brave enemy,' Dacres later reported. 'The greatest care being taken to prevent our men losing the smallest trifle, and the greatest attention being paid to the wounded.' But then, Dacres had been no less chivalrous, allowing 10 impressed American seamen serving in Guerrière's crew to shelter below decks rather than force them to fight their own countrymen. After the war was over, Hull and Dacres became lifelong friends.

If Constitution's escape from Broke's squadron had been a source of mild humiliation to the Royal Navy, news of her victory overGuerrière came as an unqualified shock to the British. 'It is not merely that an English frigate has been taken, after what we are free to express, may be called a brave resistance,' noted The Times of London, 'but that it has been taken by a new

enemy, an enemy unaccustomed to such triumphs, likely to be rendered insolent and confident by them.' Apparently forgetting some American successes from the War of Independence, The Times added, 'Never in the history of the world did an English frigate strike to an American.'

Dacres was later paroled from captivity by the Americans, only to face a court-martial for the loss of his ship. He was exonerated, however, when it was revealed that Guerrière's masts were rotten at the time of the fight. That disadvantage aside, the British frigate had been outgunned and outclassed by her larger American opponent. As for his confidence that British experience, seamanship and fighting élan would prevail over Constitution's greater firepower, after having witnessed the coolheaded discipline of Hull's crew during the earlier sea chase, Dacres should have known better.

For the Americans, the victorious outcome of the war's first naval engagement provided an immeasurable boost to morale–and a natural foundation for legend. The words of a young crewman as he watched one of Guerrière's round shot glance harmlessly off the triple-layered live oak superstructure of his ship–'Good God, her sides are made of iron!'–became a fixture in American folklore and the source of the nickname by which Constitution was known thereafter: 'Old Ironsides.'

Constitution's first success would not be her last. Shortly afterward, Hull relinquished command to Captain William Bainbridge, andConstitution was made flagship of a squadron comprised of herself, the 36-gun frigate Essex and the sloop of war Hornet. Sailing from Boston on October 26, Constitution and Hornet had to proceed without Essex, which was still being fitted out in Philadelphia, and they, too, later parted company off Bahia, Brazil.

Three days later, Constitution encountered HMS Java, a new French frigate captured 18 months earlier and pressed into British service, which was escorting William, an American merchantman that she had recently captured. Java dispatched her prize to Bahia, then turned to square off with Constitution.

Although Java was the faster ship, after an hour of maneuvering Constitution managed to score a hit on Java's head rig, bowsprit and jib boom, depriving the British ship of her headsails and much of her control. Bainbridge, though struck in the leg by a musket ball and wounded in the hip by a copper bolt when his wheel was shattered by a shot from Java, closed in to press his advantage and dismasted her with two more raking broadsides.

Even in this helpless state, Java put up a gallant fight. Her captain, Henry Lambert, was shot in the chest by a marine while attempting to lead a boarding party onto the American vessel, and his first lieutenant, Henry Ducie Chads, kept up the fight for a time thereafter. But finally, when

Constitution took position off Java‘s bow for a final broadside, Chads decided that ‘it would be wasting lives to resist any longer’ and struck his colors.

USS Constitution broadsides HMS Java

Compared to the 15 minutes it had taken to disable Guerrière, Constitution‘s slogging match with Java had taken nearly four hours. Too badly holed to take as a prize, Java was burned. Only her wheel was salvaged and used to replace Constitution’s. The 360 survivors of her crew, including about 100 wounded, were put ashore at Bahia, where Captain Lambert succumbed to his wound soon afterwards.

Java‘s destruction marked the third British loss in less than a year; in addition to Constitution‘s two victories, her sister ship, United States, commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur, had dismasted the 35-gun Macedonian off the Canary Islands and, after spending two weeks restoring the prize to sailing condition, brought her back to New York after a return voyage of nearly 4,000 miles.

After undergoing a complete yard overhaul in Boston, Constitution returned to sea in December 1813. By then, the British blockade was tightening all along the Eastern seaboard, and the Royal Navy, having acquired a new respect for the big American frigates, was making it a policy for its own frigates to operate in units of two or more, so that in the event of an encounter they could team up to overpower their larger opponent. In the course of running in and out of Boston for what proved to be ineffective commerce-raiding sorties, Constitution had a few more close brushes with superior forces, avoiding combat on each occasion. During one such encounter, on April 3, 1814, Constitution ran foul of British frigates Juno and Tenedos off Cape Ann, Mass., and was only able to outrun them by the use of every inch of canvas, including the royal studding sails, taking temporary shelter in Gloucester Harbor before making her way back to Boston.

On December 17, 1814, 'Old Ironsides,' now under the command of Captain Charles Stewart, managed to slip past the Boston blockade and resume her commerce-raiding activities. She managed to seize a merchantman off the Portuguese coast, but shortly afterward, on February 22, 1815, she encountered the light frigate Cyane (34 guns), under Captain Gordon Falcon, and the corvetteLevant (22 guns, mostly 32-pound carronades), captained by the Honorable Sir George Douglass. Although they were individually outgunned by the big American frigate, the two British ships might have overpowered Constitution by a skillful team effort (the kind of effort that had helped the British frigate Phoebe and the sloop Cherub to capture USS Essex in Valparaiso Bay on March 28, 1814–and, in a later century, allowed the Allied cruisers Exeter, Ajax and Achilles to foil the German pocket battleship Graf Spee off the River Plate on December 13, 1939). Indeed, by the time action commenced at 6 p.m., the captains of Cyane and Levant were prepared to work together to corner Constitution in their collective cross-fire–aided, they hoped, by the gathering darkness.

Captain Stewart, however, understood exactly what the British were trying to do and was not about to let them succeed. Using the skill and discipline of his now well-seasoned crew to advantage, he put Constitution through some extraordinary maneuvers to keep the British vessels separated and deal with them in turn. At one point, a broadside of double shot had disabled Levant when Stewart saw Cyane coming up astern and positioning herself to rake his ship. He reacted by having Constitution's headsails cast loose and the main and mizzen topsails backed, with the incredible result of stopping and backing his ship out of danger and positioning himself to give Cyane a murderous, diagonal raking broadside.

After an hour of punishment from Constitution's guns, Cyane surrendered. Levant fled to effect emergency repairs, then bravely returned to resume the fight. By that time, however, Constitution had turned the odds decisively in her own favor, and one last murderous broadside forced Levant to strike her colors as well.

Of a collective total of 313 men, the two British ships lost 35 killed and 46 wounded. The virtuoso seamanship of Constitution'scaptain and crew had kept her casualties down to four dead and 10 wounded. In Stewart's cabin, Captains Falcon and Douglass got into an argument over who had been responsible for losing the battle until Stewart intervened: 'Gentlemen, there is no use in getting warm about it; it would have been the same whatever you might have done. If you doubt that, I will put you all on board and you can try it over.'

Given a prize crew, Levant was later recaptured by three frigates of the Boston blockade that had been hunting for Constitution since her breakout. Constitution and Cyane managed to reach Puerto Rico, where Stewart learned that the war had ended. Signed on Christmas Eve, the Treaty of Ghent was officially ratified on February 18, with a 30-day grace period to allow for the time

needed to convey the news to the United States and to the combatants' ships at sea. Under those circumstances, Constitution's victory overCyane and Levant was regarded as the excusable result of slow communications, rather than an embarrassing breach of the treaty. On May 15, Stewart returned to a gala reception in New York, having won Constitution her third naval victory.

In the course of the War of 1812, Constitution had successfully defied the odds on several occasions, her escape from Broke's squadron being undoubtedly the most suspenseful. After serving in the peacetime navy, she was returned to Boston on July 4, 1828, and left to rot until the autumn of 1830, when she was declared unseaworthy and condemned.

Constitution's final struggle for survival was won against her own navy. A public outcry of patriotic fervor, spurred on by Oliver Wendell Holmes' poem Old Ironsides, prevailed over the Navy Department to save the 'eagle of the sea' from the 'harpies of the shore,' as the poet himself put it. In February 1831, the first of a number of restorations returned Constitution to a seaworthy state. As a diplomatic ship, she paid goodwill visits to ports all over the world. From August 1853 to June 1855, she patrolled the African coast to enforce the 1807 law banning the slave trade, taking her last prize in September 1853 when she caught the American schooner Gambril in the act of trying to smuggle slaves to the United States. From 1860 to 1871, she served as a school ship, then was retired once and for all from any duties other than that of an historic relic of the Age of Sail. Preserved by the U.S. Navy in the Charlestown Navy Yard unit of the Boston National Historical Park, Constitution is the oldest warship still in commission on the Navy's rolls. About 20 percent of the ship is original.

In September 1992, Constitution was placed in the Quincy Adams dry dock, where she had undergone her first major overhaul in 1833. There, sailors and civilian employees working for the Navy, aided by ultrasonic testing and X-rays, performed an inspection and repairs worth $5 million, including the reinstallation of key structural supports. Even while such maintenance was being carried out, on-board tours of the ship continued, together with tours of the nearby USS Constitution Museum and the World War II-vintage destroyer Cassin.

***Constitution* fires a 17-gun salute in Boston Harbor, 4 July 2014.**

[Source: http://www.historynet.com/uss-constitution-the-legendary-survivor.htm | December 2016 ++]