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The Inspiring Victory of the *USS Constitution* During the War of 1812

When war was declared between the British Empire and United States of America in 1812, the Atlantic Ocean swiftly became a battlefield. These battles, fought mainly between naval frigates and occasionally privateers, created waves of shock throughout the United States as British warships maneuvered to secure significant victories over their enemies. However, it was the inspiring victory of the *USS Constitution* over the *HMS Guerrière* greatly rekindled hope and patriotism and inspired the Americans to continue its fight during the War of 1812.

Since the beginning of the war, America had been struggling with its naval operations against the British. The entire fleet of the United States Navy consisted of only sixteen warships that were stripped bare of essential weaponry and were at a significant disadvantage during ship to ship engagements with the Royal Navy (Blohm 8). As a result, the American government instructed its naval force to only protect coastal cities as well as “to capture or destroy some of the British cargo ships carrying supplies bound for Canada” (Nardo 37). American leaders also ordered the navy to avoid unnecessary engagements with British warships. Many commanders of American warships lacked even a basic understanding of how to prepare a naval fleet for combat. Worse, during the beginning of the war, the United States Navy resorted to recruiting unqualified men who did not even know how to perform simple tasks onboard a ship (Lawson

101). These problems contributed to a series of military defeats and as a result, the American public was divided between supporting and opposing the war effort.

Meanwhile, the Royal Navy quickly recognized the inherent weaknesses of the United States Navy. They believed that “defeat at the hands of an American crew was inconceivable” and felt “nothing by contempt for the American Navy” (Daughan 76). Many British officers even referred to American ships as “a few feeble fir-build frigates manned by a handful of outlaws” (Lawson 101). However, the Royal Navy did underestimate the United States’ resolve. American officers were angered by government orders to avoid combat with British warships. As a result, American naval officers sailed their frigates away from coastal ports and defiantly hunted for British warships (Nardo 38). One such vessel was the *USS Constitution*.

The *USS Constitution*, one of the sixteen warships the United States possessed, was a frigate commanded by Captain Isaac Hull. It consisted of over 400 men who had no combat experience (Blohm 8). Hull, however, wanted a “taut ship” and trained his crew for hours to “become experts at seamanship and gunnery” (Lawson 101). Due to his intense training, the crew of the *Constitution* became well disciplined sailors who were prepared for stressful combat scenarios.

In the middle of July, 1812, Captain Hull observed a naval squadron off in the distance and noted that it consisted of five vessels, including the *HMS Guerrière*. The American frigate began to shadow the squadron from a safe distance. However, when a lack of wind caused the *Constitution* to lose power, the enemy ships quickly moved in to surround the American frigate. Through a combination of physical strength, excellent seamanship and deceit, the *Constitution* was able to avoid capture.

To increase his chances of escape, Hull ordered the frigate's smaller boats to be manned by crewmen and dropped into the ocean. Sailors then tied rope lines to the frigate and physically hauled the warship away from the enemy. As British ships moved in to cut off Hull's route of escape, a light breeze suddenly began blowing. The wind allowed the *USS Constitution* to raise additional sails and increase speed. Although Hull was able to break away from the British squadron, the enemy ships continued to pursue the him. To lighten his load and increase his speed further, the captain ordered over two thousand gallons of drinking water thrown overboard (Nardo 42). Hull was able to pull the *Constitution* out of enemy cannon range. At the suggestion of an American lieutenant, Hull began a "kedging operation" (Blohm 8). For the next two days, two groups of crew and officers of the *Constitution* rowed the ship's anchors several hundred yards ahead of the ship and dropped them to the ocean floor. Men on board the ship, including Hull, performed the back breaking task of working the capstan, a cylinder like structure that was used to return anchors and their lines back to the ship (Nardo 43). By performing the kedging operation, the *Constitution* was not only pulled towards the anchors that were sitting on the ocean floor, but were able to expand their distance from the enemy. On the third day of the chase, Hull discovered a squall on the horizon (Blohm 8). He ordered the frigate's sails to be lowered and directed that the ship be pulled into the storm. Once the *Constitution* entered the storm, the Royal Navy lost sight of the American frigate. When the storm passed, the *Constitution* was miles away from the pursuing squadron. A later captain of the *Constitution* observed, "Isaac Hull and his crew, who had been together at sea for just . . . [a few] days, had outsailed a numerically superior British squadron in a 57-hour demonstration of endurance,

teamwork, and skilled seamanship. It would not be the last time that this combination would embarrass their English cousins” (Nardo 43).

In response to the American reports, Captain James Dacres, the commanding officer of the *HMS Guerrière*, publically scoffed at the American Navy and argued that the *Constitution*'s escape was a lucky break. He then issued an open challenge to any American ships to come out and fight him. He had even gloated that “his ship would quickly send any U.S. frigate to the bottom of the sea” (Nardo 43)

Although there is no primary evidence Captain Hull accepted this challenge, the *USS Constitution* left Boston in search of prizes, including the *Guerrière*. While off the coast of Massachusetts, Hull crossed paths with the American privateer *Decatur*, a Newburyport ship under the command of Captain William Nichols. Nichols informed Hull that he saw a “large warship” to the south (Daughan 76). On August 19, 1812, the crew spotted a large ship sailing leeward and recognized the vessel as the *HMS Guerrière* and moved in to attack. The American crew “gave three cheers, and requested to be laid close alongside the chace” (Hull Engagement with HMS). The two ships “moved around each other. Each displayed amazing skill, and neither could outmaneuver the other” (Nardo 44). The *Constitution* was larger than the *Guerrière* and had more crew members. However, the *Guerrière* had more guns (Daughan 76). Both sides had opened fire, though the shots from the *Guerrière* had either fell short, went over the rigging of the *Constitution*, or hit the ship and “fell harmlessly into the sea” (Lawson 105). As one American sailor exclaimed, “Huzza! Her sides are made of iron!” In response, the *Constitution* raked the *Guerrière* with cannon fire, destroying its rigging, masts and hull. The British vessel was dead in the water and could not defend itself from the relentless American attack. At some

point, the *Guerrière*'s mast fell, entangling its rigging with the *Constitution*'s own lines.

American marines, perched in the masts of their ships, fired down on the enemy's crew. With his ship disabled and starting to sink, Dacres and his officers concluded that any further resistance would lead to a greater loss of life (Daughan 78-81). As a result, the *Guerrière* surrendered. Dacres praised Hull and the crew of the *Constitution* and called them "a brave enemy" (Dacres "Engagement with HMS").

The *USS Constitution*'s victory over the *HMS Guerrière* "sent a new surge of hope through the American people" (Lawson 108). The celebration for the *Constitution*'s victory was very large with gun salutes and applause from gathering people in Boston (Daughan 81). The doubt and unease that had crippled the public throughout the earlier months of the war had suddenly come to an end (Brenckle Interview). It was said that "the courage and skill of American seamen in the face of overwhelming odds became a source of pride and hope for the American people" (Nardo 49). When a small United States frigate emerged triumphant over the world's most powerful navy, a wave of nationalism helped improve the American military's morale and allowed them to push forward with the war effort. American leaders, including President Madison, recognized the importance of the Navy and concurred that it should be expanded as quickly as possible. Military leaders recognized the significance of the *Constitution*'s victory and rapidly began to work on repeating its success. As a result, naval operations began to improve significantly. Naval captains became very confident in their possible success against the Royal Navy. Shortly afterwards, the United States Navy witnessed a string of victories, including the *USS United States*' defeat of the *HMS Macedonian*, the *USS Wasp*'s defeat of the *HMS Frolic*, and the *USS Constitution*'s defeat of the *HMS Java* (Lawson

108). Following these significant accomplishments, the Royal Navy recognized that the American Navy was not a collection of bandits and British officers gained respect for the American Navy.

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