

# Escape from an Enemy Squadron, 1812

## Old Ironsides' Battle Record: Documents of USS *Constitution's* Illustrious Deeds

When war was declared on Great Britain, 18 June 1812, the *Constitution* had just left Alexandria, Virginia, destined for Annapolis, Maryland. After resupplying she set sail for New York. What her captain, Isaac Hull, did not know was that a squadron British ships was organizing off New York to blockade the harbor. On 15 July, *Constitution* ran into HMS *Guerriere*, which was soon joined by four other vessels in chase of the American warship.

Captain Hull's official report to the Secretary of the Navy outlines the three-day chase off the coast of New Jersey. In his own words he describes how he successfully outmaneuvered and outran the British squadron in one of the most dramatic American naval episodes. Eventually, Hull was able to dock *Constitution* at Boston. Just a few weeks later *Constitution* would meet *Guerriere* again under much different circumstances.

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21 July 1812

Captain Isaac Hull to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton

U.S. Frigate *Constitution*  
At Sea July 21st 1812

Sir,

In pursuance of your orders of the 3d inst I left Annapolis on the 5th inst and the Capes on the 12th of which I advised you by the Pilot that brought the Ship to sea.

For several days after we got out the wind was light, and ahead which with a Strong Southerly current prevented our making much way to the Northward On the 17th at 2 PM being in 22 fathoms water off Egg harbour four sail of Ships were discovered from the Mast Head to the Northward and in shore of us; apparently Ships of War The wind being very light all sail was made in chase of them, to ascertain whether they were Enemy's Ships, or our Squadron having got out of New York waiting the arrival of the *Constitution*, the latter of which, I had reason to believe was the case.

At 4 in the afternoon a Ship was seen from the Mast head bearing about NE Standing for us under all sail, which she continued to do until Sundown at which time, she was too far off to distinguish signals and the Ships in Shore, only to be seen from the Tops, they were standing off to the Southward, and Eastward. As we could not ascertain before dark, what the Ship in the offing was, I determined to stand for her and get near enough to make the night signal. At 10 in the Evening being within Six or Eight miles of the Strange sail, the

Private Signal was made, and kept up nearly one hour, but finding she could not answer it, I concluded she, and the Ships in Shore were Enemy. I immediately hauled off to the Southward, and Eastward, and made all sail, having determined to lay off till day light, to see what they were. The Ship that we had been chasing hauled off after us showing a light, and occasionally making signals, supposed to be for the Ships in Shore.

18th. At day light, or a little before it was quite light, Saw two sail under our Lee, which proved to be Frigates of the Enemies. One Frigate astern within about five or Six miles, and a Line of Battle Ship, a Frigate, a Brig, and Schooner, about ten or twelve miles directly astern all in chase of us, with a fine breeze, and coming up very fast it being nearly calm where we were. Soon after Sunrise the wind entirely left us, and the Ship would not steer but fell round off with her head towards the two Ships under our lee.

The Boats were instantly hoisted out, and sent ahead to tow the Ships head round, and to endeavour to get her farther from the Enemy, being then within five miles of three heavy Frigates. The Boats of the Enemy were got out, and sent ahead to tow, which with the light air that remained with them, they came up very fast. Finding the Enemy coming fast up and but little chance of escaping from them; I ordered two of the Guns on the Gun Deck, run out at the Cabbin windows for Stern Guns on the gun deck, and hoisted one of the 24 Pounders off the Gundeck, and run that, with the Fore Castle Gun, an Eighteen pounder, out at the Ports on the quarter Deck, and cleared the Ship for Action, being determined they should not get her, without resistance on our part, notwithstanding their force, and the situation we were placed in. At about 7 in the Morning the Ship nearest us approaching with Gun Shot, and directly astern, I ordered one of the Stern Guns fired to see if we could reach her, to endeavour to disable her masts, found the Shot fell a little Short, would not fire any more.

At 8 four of the Enemy's Ships nearly within Gun Shot, some of them having six or eight boats ahead towing, with all their oars, and sweeps out to row them up with us, which they were fast doing. It soon appeared that we must be taken, and that our Escape was impossible, four heavy Ships nearly within Gun Shot, and coming up fast, and not the least hope of a breeze, to give us a chance of getting off by out sailing them. In this Situation finding ourselves in only twenty four fathoms water (by the suggestion of that valuable officer Lieutenant [Charles] Morris) I determined to try and warp the Ship ahead, by carrying out anchors and warp her up to them, Three or four hundred fathoms of rope was instantly got up, and two anchors got ready and sent ahead, by which means we began to gain ahead of the Enemy, They however soon saw our Boats carrying out the anchors, and adopted the same plan, under very advantageous circumstances, as all the Boats, from the Ship furthest off were sent to Tow, and Warp up those nearest to us, by which means they again came up, So that at 9 the Ship nearest us began firing her bow guns, which we instantly returned by our Stern guns in the cabbin, and on the quarter Deck; All the Shots from the Enemy fell short, but we have reason to believe that some of ours went on board her, as we could not see them strike the Water.

Soon after 9 a Second Frigate passed under our lee, and opened her Broadside, but finding her shot fall short, discontinued her fire, but continued as did all the rest of them,

to make every possible exertion to get up with us. From 9 to 12 all hands were employed in warping the Ship ahead, and in starting some of the water in the main Hold, to lighten her, which with the help of a light air, we rather gained of the Enemy, or at least hold our own. About 2 in the afternoon, all the Boats from the line of Battle Ship, and some of the Frigates, were sent to the Frigate nearest to us, to endeavour to tow her up, but a light breeze sprung up, which enabled us to hold way with her notwithstanding they had Eight or Ten Boats ahead, and all her sails furled to tow her to windward. The wind continued light until 11 at night, and the Boats were kept ahead towing, and warping to keep out of the reach of the Enemy, Three of their Frigates being very near us. At 11 we got a light breeze from the Southward, the boats came along side, and were hoisted up, the Ship having too much way to keep them ahead, The Enemy still in chase, and very near.

19th. At day light passed within gunshot of one of the Frigates but she did not fire on us, perhaps for fear of becalming her as the wind was light Soon after passing us, she tacked, and stood after us, at this time Six Sail were in Sight under all sail after us.

At 9 in the morning saw a Strange sail on our Weather Beam, supposed to be an American merchant ship, the instant the Frigate, nearest us saw her she hoisted American colours, as did all the Squadron in hopes to decoy her down, I immediately hoisted English colours, that she might not be deceived, she soon hauled her wind, and it is to be hoped made her escape. All this day the Wind increased gradually and we gained on the Enemy, in the course of the day Six or Eight miles, they however continued chasing us all night under a press of Sail.

20th. At day light in the Morning only three of them could be seen from the Mast head, the nearest of which, was about 12 miles off directly astern. All hands were set at work wetting the Sails, from the Royals down, with the Engine, and Fire buckets, and we soon found that we left the Enemy very fast. At 1/4 past 8 the Enemy finding that they were fast dropping astern, gave over chase, and hauled their wind to the Northward, probably for the Station off New York. At 1/2 past 8 Saw a sail ahead gave chase after her under all sail. At 9 Saw another Strange sail under our Lee Bow, we soon spoke the first sail, discovered and found her to be an American Brig from St Domingue bound Portland, I directed the Captain how to steer to avoid the Enemy, and made sail for the vessel to leeward, on coming up with her, She proved to be an American Brig from St Bartholemews, bound to Philadelphia, but on being informed of War he bore up for Charleston, S.C.

Finding the Ship so far to the Southward, and Eastward, and the Enemy's Squadron stationed off New York, which would make it impossible for the Ship to get in there. I determined to make for Boston to receive your further orders, and I hope that my having done so will meet your approbation. My wish to explain to you as clearly as possible why your orders, have not been executed, and the length of time the Enemy were in chase of us with various other circumstances, has caused me to make this communication much longer than I would have wished, yet I cannot (in justice to the brave Officers, and crew under my Command) close it without expressing to you the confidence I have in them, and assuring you that their conduct whilst under the Guns of the Enemy was such as

might have been expected from American Officers and Seamen. I have the Honour to be  
[&c.]

Isaac Hull

Source: National Archives, Record Group 45, Captain's Letters, 1812, Volume 2, No.127.



THE WORKS OF  
THEODORE ROOSEVELT  
MEMORIAL EDITION

expedient to escape, but to no purpose. At 3 P. M., of the following day, when the British ships were abreast of Barnegat, about four leagues offshore, a strange sail was seen and immediately chased, in the south by east, or windward quarter, standing to the northeast. This was the United States frigate *Constitution*, 44, Captain Isaac Hull.<sup>1</sup> When the war broke out he was in the Chesapeake River getting a new crew aboard. Having shipped over 450 men (counting officers), he put out of harbor on the 12th of July. His crew was entirely new, drafts of men coming on board up to the last moment.<sup>2</sup>

On the 17th, at 2 P. M., Hull discovered four sail, in the northern board, heading to the westward. At 3, the wind being very light, the *Constitution* made sail and tacked, in  $18\frac{1}{2}$  fathoms. At 4, in the N. E., a fifth sail appeared, which afterward proved to be the *Guerrière*. The first four ships bore N. N. W., and were all on the starboard tack; while by 6 o'clock the fifth bore E. N. E. At 6.15 the wind shifted and blew lightly from the south, bringing the American ship to windward. She then wore round with her head to the eastward, set her light studdingsails and staysails, and at 7.30 beat to action, intending to speak the nearest vessel, the *Guerrière*. The two frigates neared one another gradually and at 10 the *Constitution* began making signals, which she continued for over an hour. At 3.30 A. M. on the 18th the *Guerrière*, going gradually toward the *Constitution* on the port tack, and but one-half mile distant, discovered on her lee beam the *Belvidera* and the other British vessels, and signalled to them. They did not answer the signals, thinking she must know who they were—a circumstance which afterward gave rise to sharp recriminations among the captains—and Dacres, concluding them to be Commodore Rodgers's squadron, tacked, and then wore round and stood away from the *Constitution* for some time before discovering his mistake.

At 5 A. M. Hull had just enough steerage way on to keep his head to the east, on the starboard tack; on his lee quarter, bearing N. E. by N., were the *Belvidera* and *Guerrière*, and astern the *Shannon*, *Eolus*, and *Africa*. At 5.30 it fell entirely calm, and Hull put out his boats to tow the ship, always going southward. At the same time he whipped up a 24 from the main-deck, and got the fore-castle-chaser aft, cutting away the taff-

rail to give the two guns more freedom to work in and also running out, through the cabin windows, two of the long main-deck 24's. The British boats were towing also. At 6 A. M. a light breeze sprang up, and the *Constitution* set studdingsails and staysails; the *Shannon* opened at her with her bow guns, but ceased when she found she could not reach her. At 6.30, the wind having died away, the *Shannon* began to gain, almost all the boats of the squadron towing her. Having sounded in 26 fathoms, Lieutenant Charles Morris suggested to Hull to try kedging. All the spare rope was bent on to the cables, paid out into the cutters, and a kedge run out half a mile ahead and let go; then the crew clapped on and walked away with the ship, over-running and tripping the kedge as she came up with the end of the line. Meanwhile, fresh lines and another kedge were carried ahead, and the frigate glided away from her pursuers. At 7.30 A. M. a little breeze sprang up, when the *Constitution* set her ensign and fired a shot at the *Shannon*. It soon fell calm again and the *Shannon* neared. At 9.10 a light air from the southward struck the ship, bringing her to windward. As the breeze was seen coming, her sails were trimmed, and as soon as she obeyed her helm she was brought close up on the port tack. The boats dropped alongside; those that belonged to the davits were run up, while the others were just lifted clear of the water, by purchases on the spare spars, stowed outboard, where they could be used again at a minute's notice. Meanwhile, on her lee beam the *Guerrière* opened fire; but her shot fell short, and the Americans paid not the slightest heed to it. Soon it again fell calm, when Hull had 2,000 gallons of water started, and again put out his boats to tow. The *Shannon*, with some of the other boats of

the squadron helping her, gained on the *Constitution*, but by severe exertion was again left behind. Shortly afterward, a slight wind springing up, the *Belvidera* gained on the other British ships, and when it fell calm she was nearer to the *Constitution* than any of her consorts, their boats being put on to her.<sup>1</sup> At 10.30, observing the benefit that the *Constitution* had derived from warping, Captain Byron did the same, bending all his hawsers to one another, and working two kedge anchors at the same time by paying the warp out through one hawse-hole as it was run in through the other opposite. Having men from the other frigates aboard, and a lighter ship to work, Captain Byron, at 2 P. M., was near enough to exchange bow and stern chasers with the *Constitution*, out of range, however. Hull expected to be overtaken, and made every arrangement to try in such case to disable the first frigate before her consorts could close. But neither the *Belvidera* nor the *Shannon* dared to tow very near for fear of having their boats sunk by the American's stern-chasers.

The *Constitution's* crew showed the most excellent spirit. Officers and men relieved each other regularly, the former snatching their rest anywhere on deck, the latter sleeping at the guns. Gradually the *Constitution* drew ahead, but the situation continued most critical. All through the afternoon the British frigates kept towing and kedging, being barely out of gunshot. At 3 P. M., a light breeze sprung up, and blew fitfully at intervals; every puff was watched closely and taken advantage of to the utmost. At 7 in the evening the wind

almost died out, and for four more weary hours the worn-out sailors towed and kedged. At 10.45 a little breeze struck the frigate, when the boats dropped alongside and were hoisted up, excepting the first cutter. Throughout the night the wind continued very light, the *Belvidera* forging ahead till she was off the *Constitution's* lee beam; and at 4 A. M. on the morning of the 19th, she tacked to the eastward, the breeze being light from the south by east. At 4.20 the *Constitution* tacked also; and at 5.15 the *Eolus*, which had drawn ahead, passed on the contrary tack. Soon afterward the wind freshened so that Captain Hull took in his cutter. The *Africa* was now so far to leeward as to be almost out of the race; while the five frigates were all running on the starboard tack with every stitch of canvas set. At 9 A. M. an American merchantman hove in sight and bore down toward the squadron. The *Belvidera*, by way of decoy, hoisted American colors, when the *Constitution* hoisted the British flag, and the merchant vessel hauled off. The breeze continued light till noon, when Hull found he had dropped the British frigates well behind;