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British squadron chases U.S. Frigate Constitution, July 1812. Painting by Anton Otto Fischer



## 200 PLUS

## The Fortification of the Fleet



*ON THE HIGH SEAS: The USS Constitution in full sail.*

**O**ff the beaches of Long Beach Island one hot July 172 years ago, a naval battle took place which not only changed the course of American history but aimed an infant United States Navy toward respectability.

The story begins with the Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution. Because of expenses, and the fact that few saw a reason for its existence in peacetime, the United States Navy was disbanded. Over the next 10 years America tried to be friendly with all nations, but learned slowly that everyone picks on a weakling. England and France routinely stopped United States merchant ships and removed sailors to work aboard their ships, a detested practice known as impressment. In the Mediterranean Sea, a group of small kingdoms called the Barbary States began seizing United States ships and ransoming

them back.

Finally, in 1794, Congress authorized the building of six frigates to become the United States Navy. Work was stopped, however, when a treaty was worked out to pay extortion to the Barbary pirates rather than fight them.

President Washington wrote Congress arguing the need for a navy: "It is my experience that the most sincere neutrality is not sufficient guard against the depredation of nations at-war. To secure respect to a neutral flag requires a naval force, organized and ready to protect it from insult or aggression."

As war clouds gathered over England and France, Congress reluctantly voted to finish the ships. Following the designs of Joshua Humphreys, the new frigates took shape. The most famous was built in Boston and christened the *USS Constitution*. Humphrey was a

master architect and builder and the *Constitution* was his masterpiece. The ship's masts came from the tallest, straightest trees in Maine, oak plank from the forests of New England, and yellow pine from Georgia and South Carolina. Different trees had special uses for the ship, some for strength, others for flexibility, and for speed, a copper plating by Paul Revere was added.

By October 1797, she was ready. Extending 204 feet in length and with three giant masts, she carried a total of 36 sails. She was listed as having 44 guns but normally carried 55. Humphreys had designed a super frigate with enough firepower to sink anything of equal size and enough speed to outrun anything too big to fight.

Over the next 15 years the *Constitution* carried the flag to all parts of the world. She eventually fought and defeated the Barbary pirates at Tripoli, and by the spring of 1812 was just finishing an overhaul at Annapolis, Md.

During this time France and England had been continually at war. Because England attempted to starve Napoleon into submission by using a blockade and needed sailors to man her ships, neutral American sailors became easy prey. After years of this humiliation and a hope by some of capturing British Canada, President James Madison signed Congress' declaration of war on June 18, 1812.

In command of the *Constitution* at this time was Connecticut native Issac Hull, who was 39 years old. He had served at sea since the age of 12 and had been with the *Constitution* fighting the Barbary pirates.

The news that Hull received from the other ship captains in Washington was very distressing. The Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, had convinced President Madison that the American Navy and sailors were no match for the English. He suggested that the *Constitution* should report to New York City, have one-half of her guns removed, and be tied to a dock as a floating fort to protect the city.

Hull's orders arrived as follows: "Sir: This day war was declared between the United Empire of Great Britain...and the United States...you are, with the force of your command, entitled to every belligerent right to attack and capture, and to defend. You will use the utmost dispatch to reach New York...but you are not to understand me as impelling you to battle previously to your having confidence in your crew, unless attacked...."

As Hull left to prepare his ship for sea, other captains requested to talk directly with President Madison. They argued that United States ships were built better than British ships. They said American cannons were more accurate, their crews better trained, and the Marines, who stood in the rigging with rifles to pick off enemy officers, were experienced fighters. They urged that the Navy be allowed to prove itself.

Finally, after several days of indecision,

Madison agreed to give the Navy a small chance. He would make a final decision when the *Constitution* reached New York City.

Meanwhile, Hull had joined the *Constitution* at Annapolis and was preparing the ship for sea. First, any sailors formerly in the British navy were released. If captured, the British hanged them as deserters. Next, training and gunning practice was held. On July 6, 1812, still without a full crew, Hull ordered the *Constitution* to weigh anchor. He wrote to his father, "Should anything happen to me I leave but little, but it may be sufficient to make you comfortable during your stay in this troublesome world."

As the *Constitution* sailed down Chesapeake Bay and word spread she was looking for a fight, more and more sailors volunteered to join her. As soon as they were taken aboard Hull assigned them to duty. The *Constitution's* big 24-pounders could be heard for miles as the men learned to fire the guns of the war ship.

By July 12, as the *Constitution* cleared the mouth of the Chesapeake, she had a full complement of 450 officers and men. Hull ordered his navigator to turn north and set a course for Barnegat, N.J. What Hull did not know was that a British squadron of five ships, under the command of Sir Philip Bowes Vere Broke, was waiting off the Jersey coast. The flag ship, the *H M S Shannon*, mounted 36 guns, and with it were the frigate *Guerriere*, with 38 guns, the 64-gun *Africa*, and the *Aeolus* and *Belvidere*, each mounting 32 guns.

Hull and the *Constitution* stayed close to shore as they headed north so as to intercept and warn coastal merchant ships of the declaration of war. On the morning of July 16, off the South Jersey coast, they warned a merchant ship to head for port, then headed north again. By early afternoon the *Constitution* was in 22 fathoms of water and in sight of the Jersey shore. At 2 p.m. the cry "sail ho" came from the lookout and Hull strained to identify the ships.

He hoped they were part of the United States Navy squadron based at New York City. As the ships drew closer the wind died and the sea became calm. By 10:30 p.m. the ships were still six to eight miles away. Hull ordered signal lights lit but there was no answer. With the coming of daylight what Hull had feared was confirmed. Six British warships were behind him or between him in what is today Beach Haven Inlet. The British had captured an American warship, the *Nautilus*, and now turned it on Hull.

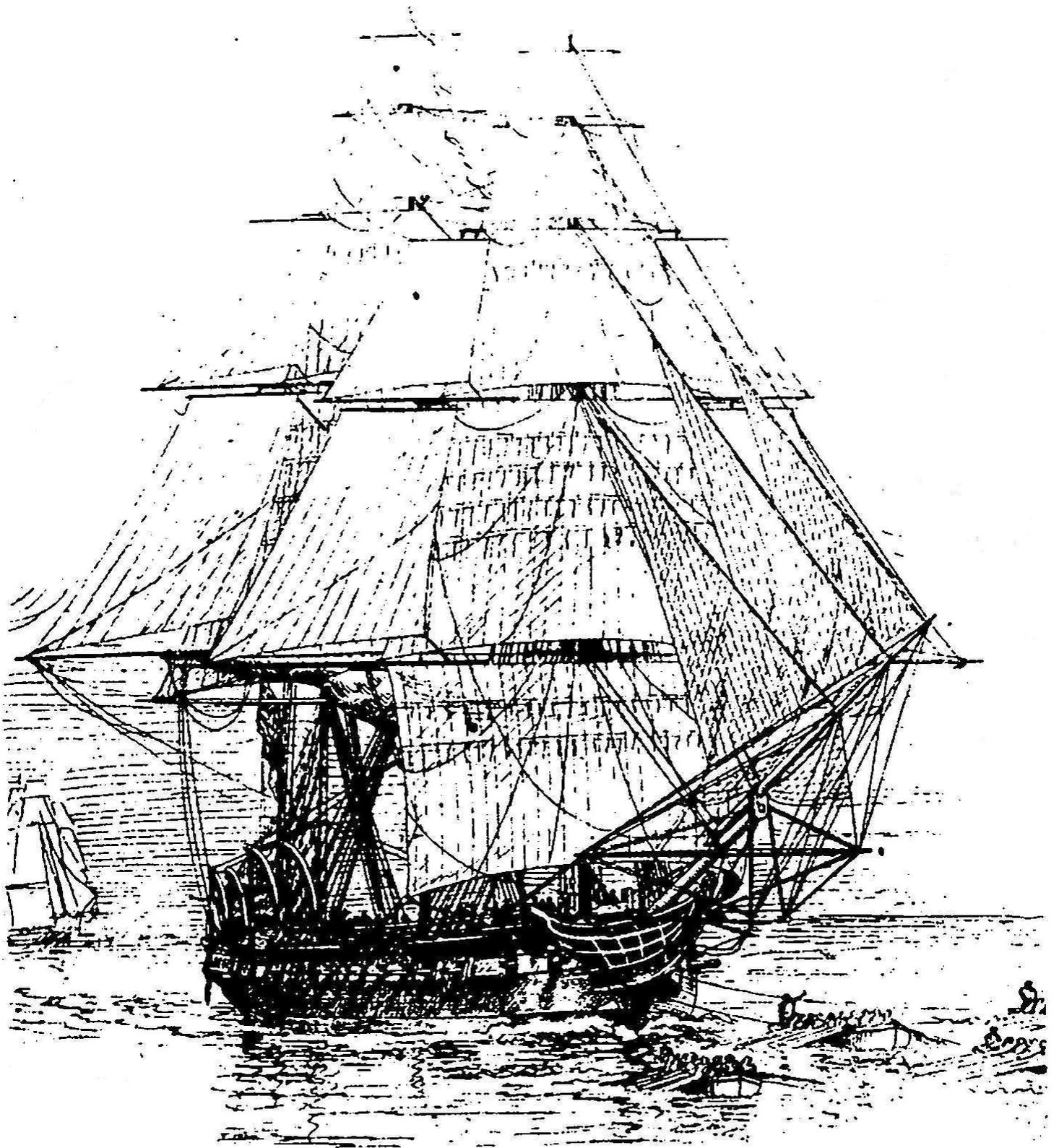
Fearing the game was about up, Hull remembered his promise to President Madison that American sailors and the United States Navy were a match for the British, but was it still true, being outnumbered 6 to 1? Hull turned to his second in command, Charles Morris, and said "Let's lay broadside to them, Mr. Morris, and fight the whole! If they sink us, we'll go down like men!"

Next week: The battle off Long Beach Island.

THOMAS P. FARNER

## 200 PLUS

# The Battle Off Long Beach Island



**UNDER TOW:** Almost trapped by a British squadron when the wind died off the coast of Long Beach Island in the War of 1812, the *Constitution's* crew rowed the ship out of range of the enemy

**W**hen President James Madison declared war against England in June 1812, he had little confidence in the fledgling United States Navy. He listened to his advisors who told him that the ships should be tied to docks in important harbors as floating forts.

His naval officers, like Isaac Hull, captain of the *USS Constitution*, thought this was a grave mistake. They argued that American seamen could match England's best, and gunners from U.S. ships could fire faster and more accurately than their enemies. Also, the marines in the rigging of their ships were backwoodsmen and

could pick off any British officer who appeared on deck.

Finally, Hull took the *Constitution* on a short cruise from Annapolis, Md. "You will weigh anchor and proceed to New York... You will be guided in your proceeding by your own judgment... You are not, voluntarily, to encounter a force superior to your own... You will remain there till further orders," he was told. As Hull and the *Constitution* headed north up the East Coast, he hoped for one chance to prove himself, his ship, and the whole United States Navy.

Off Long Beach Island on July 17, 1812, Hull got his chance. At about 2 p.m. the lookout reported four ships to the northwest. Hull, not wanting to be caught between four ships and the Island, ordered the *Constitution* to turn due east. About two hours later a fifth ship was sighted, but it was still impossible to identify all of them. As darkness approached the light breeze died completely and the *Constitution* was becalmed. In the distance a sixth sail was reported.

After dark the *Constitution* and one of the mystery ships pulled to within cannon range. Like two fighters they sized each other up but neither would fire first for fear the other was a friend. Hull ran up a private recognition signal and there was no answer. He began to prepare for the worst. As the sun rose it became evident to him that the entire fleet was British.

The ship closest to them was the frigate *Guerriere*, mounting 38 guns, followed by the frigates *Shannon*, with 36 guns, *Aeolus* and *Belvedere*, both with 32 guns, and the line of battleship, *Africa*, with 64 guns. The rear was brought up by the recently captured U.S. ship *Nautilus*, with 16 guns. Against this array of naval fire power, the *Constitution* massed only 44 guns.

Hull knew that to stand and fight meant certain defeat, so he ordered every sail raised and the great race was on. Unfortunately, the sea off the Island was calm and the *Constitution's* sails hung like bedsheets. In the distance, however, the British still had some air and were steadily closing the gap. Hull ordered men aloft with buckets of water to wet down the sails. Water closes the pores of the cloth and helps the sails to catch even the slightest breeze. Still nothing would move the great ship.

Hull then ordered, "All hands man your boats," and the *Constitution's* long boats were put over the side to tow the ship. Giant oars, called sweeps, were manned from the deck of the warship. Just then the wind died for the pursuers, and at last the weather was the same for Americans and the British.

Using this reprieve, Hull ordered two large cannons to be moved to the stern and the rails cut away to allow them to fire at their pursuers. At the same time, guns were run out the windows of Hull's cabin. In addition, 2300 gallons of fresh drinking water were dumped over the side to lighten the ship.

As the hours passed, the *Constitution* held its distance. Then the British made their move. They massed the boats from all of their ships to pull just one, the *Shannon*. Once it engaged the U.S. ship, the others could catch up. Hull, at his wits' end, watched as the *Shannon* crept closer. He ordered his men "Beat to quarters," and the ship was made ready to fight.

"If they sink us, we'll go down like men," he said. He even fired the first round at the *Shannon*, but he was out of range. Just then, Hull's second in command, Lt. Charles Morris, spoke up: "There is one thing, sir, I think we'd better try." Hull asked what it was. Try to

"kedge her off," replied Morris.

Hull agreed to give it a try. Kedging was a practice used in shallow water when a ship was becalmed. Two anchors were prepared and tied to the longest line available. The first anchor was rowed out the length of the line and dropped into the water. The anchor caught on the bottom and then the massed crew together pulled the line. As the *Constitution* was pulled to that anchor, the second anchor was being rowed out. When the first was pulled up, the second was dropped, and the entire back-breaking process was repeated over and over again.

Slowly the *Constitution* started to draw away but the British were not fools. Within a short time they too had their anchors out and were kedging to keep up. As the *Constitution* was kedged and towed, Hull kept all sails set with the hope of catching a breeze.

Several times a breeze sprang up and the *Constitution* would lurch ahead. Quickly the boats were hauled in while the great ship was under way, a very difficult and dangerous procedure. But every foot counted. The British took their sails down while towing, so the sails would not act like giant brakes. When a breeze started, the *Constitution* was able to draw away as the pursuers took time to set their sails. The British also cut the rowing boats away and let the men catch up later. This extra rowing helped to wear out the British sailors.

After almost 48 hours of pursuit an American merchant ship was sighted. The enemy ships at once struck their Union Jacks and ran up the Stars and Stripes to lure the defenseless merchantmen closer. Hull decided that two could play that game, so he ran up the Union Jack and fired on the merchant ship, which veered away.

Finally, after 66 hours, Hull could see the dark clouds of a thunderstorm approaching. The storm would reach the *Constitution* first and Hull decided to take one last gamble. As the storm drew closer to his ship, he sent his crew aloft to take in the sails and make it look like a severe storm was approaching. A few miles away, the British, not wanting to be caught off guard, also prepared for a gale.

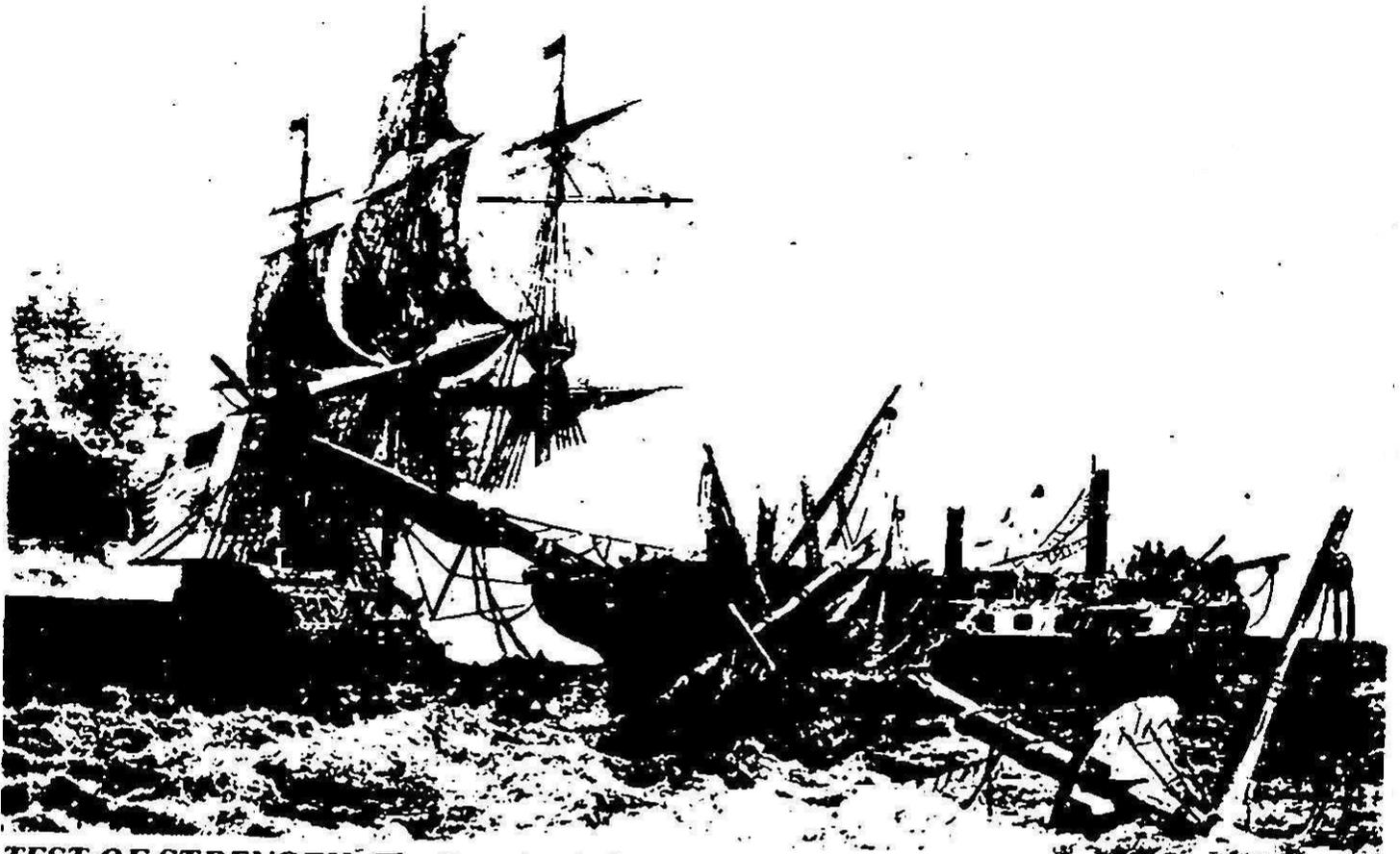
As soon as the front reached the *Constitution* and the rain obscured it from the British, Hull set all sails and was off at 11 knots. By the time the British squadron realized the storm wasn't that severe, the *Constitution* was gone.

Hull now made a decision. The waters off New Jersey had been a proving ground for his crew and they had shown what they were made of. He had confidence in them and the crew believed in him. They would follow him anywhere. These men and this ship deserved better than to spend the war tied up to some New York City dock. He decided to disobey his orders and sail to Boston, not New York.

As far as he was concerned, the battle off Long Beach Island proved his ship and crew could outsail anything in the British navy. Now he was looking for a fight. □

*Next Week: One on one, a fair fight.*

# The Constitution Proves Itself



**TEST OF STRENGTH:** *The Guerriere's fore and main masts are shattered, and its hull suffers devastating injury after engaging in battle with the Constitution on August 18, 1812 600 miles east of Boston.*

As the *USS Constitution* entered Boston Harbor on July 26, 1812, she was greeted as a conquering hero. Her escape from the British squadron off Long Beach Island proved to her captain, Issac Hull, and most of the American people that the men of the United States Navy could sail with England's best. Now only one question remained. Could they fight?

Hull had been under orders from President James Madison to sail the *Constitution* to New York where Madison's advisors had recommended she be tied to a dock to sit out the war as a floating fort. The conduct of his crew during the 66-hour chase off New Jersey convinced Hull to disregard his orders. The American Navy and his ship had to be given a chance to prove themselves.

In Boston, Hull and his crew met with a strange reception. While they were received warmly and praised for their great seamanship, they were also targets of abuse. New England was totally against the war with England and many prominent people openly supported the British. There were even plans for a meeting to discuss New England's secession from the United States.

Hull had problems getting supplies for his ship. Merchants were actually refusing to give the U.S. government credit. Finally, Hull was able to borrow money from a merchant who supported the government and get his supplies.

Hull had been waiting for new orders from President Madison but since the attitude of Boston was affecting the morale of his crew and he wanted to test his ship in battle, he decided to set sail without orders on Aug. 1, 1812. This was a very dangerous action for a career naval officer, but a lucky choice for the history of the U.S. Navy.

After the *Constitution* set sail, orders arrived from the president telling Hull to stay in Boston and not to engage any British warships. Over the next few days, however, Hull and the *Constitution* prowled the New England coast to Nova Scotia looking for any British craft heading for Canada.

He found several unarmed merchant ships which he captured and set on fire after seizing their crews. Then, on the night of Aug. 18, a sail was sighted in the distance. Hull ordered all sails set and went in pursuit. After several hours the *Constitution* caught her prey but discovered it was an American privateer, the *Decatur*.

Hull learned from the captain there was a British frigate nearby which had chased the *Decatur* only hours before. He now made all speed in the direction of the reported enemy ship.

The next afternoon the call "Sail ho!" came from the lookout. Slowly the *Constitution* gained on the mystery ship until Hull, through

his glass, could make her out. She was the *HMS Guerriere*, a sight which must have made Hull smile to himself.

First, in the years before the war, the *Guerriere* and the *Constitution* had both been at anchor in Delaware Bay. One evening ashore Hull had met the *Guerriere's* captain, James Dacres. The two started talking with a great deal of pride about their respective navies and ships.

Hull is reported to have said, "Well, you may just take good care of that ship of yours, if I catch her in the *Constitution*," to which the British captain offered to make a wager, if they should ever meet. Hull replied, "No, I'll bet no money on it, but I will stake you a hat that the *Constitution* comes out victorious." "Done," answered Dacres.

The second reason Hull was pleased about spotting the *Guerriere* was that she, with five other ships, had chased the *Constitution* off Long Beach Island. Now she was alone, one on one. It would be a fair fight.

Hull ordered his drummer to "beat to quarters." At once the ship became a living thing as men prepared for combat. Marines climbed into the rigging to pick off enemy officers and to throw hand grenades if the ship came close enough. Surgeons and their assistants brought up buckets of sand to throw onto the decks to keep men from slipping on puddles of blood. "Powder monkeys," boys of 10 and 11 years old, were ready to dash about the ship carrying gunpowder for the cannons.

As the *Constitution* came closer, the *Guerriere* opened fire first. Hull shouted to his crew, "Men, now do your duty. Your officers cannot have entire command over you now. Each man must do all in his power for his country."

He then turned to the man at the wheel of the great ship. "You shall have her as close as you please, Sailing Master! Lay her longside!" he said.

The *Constitution* crossed in front of the enemy ship like crossing a "T." As each gun came into play it was fired down the length of the *Guerriere's* deck, double loaded with a large cannon ball to damage the ship and dozens of marble-sized grape shot to annihilate the crew.

The *Guerriere* was in trouble from the start. Within 15 minutes her mizzen mast, the most

rear of the three masts, was shot away and was dragging in the water. A sailor on the *Constitution* wrote, "As we came up she began to fire... We came so near on one tack, that an eighteen-pound shot came through us under the larboard (port) knight-head striking just abaft the breech or the gun to which I belonged. The splinters flew in all directions; but no one was hurt. We immediately picked up the shot, and put it in the mouth of long Tom, a large gun loose on deck - and sent it home again, with our respects."

As the *Constitution* tried to cross the "T" again she got too close and the bowsprit of the *Guerriere* became tangled in the rigging of the *Constitution's* mizzen. Now, the marines could pour in their deadly rifle fire. When the two ships did pull away, the *Guerriere's* fore and main masts came crashing down, making her a helpless wreck with no power. As the *Constitution* approached again, Dacres ordered a signal shot fired and struck his colors.

The *Guerriere* was too badly damaged to save so Hull ordered her crew taken aboard and the British ship set afire. As Dacres was brought on board, Hull offered his hand and said to him, "Dacres, my dear fellow, I am glad to see you on board..."

"Damn it, Hull," responded Dacres, "I suppose you are." Unbuckling his sword, he offered it to his captor. "I will not take a sword from one who knows so well how to use it," said Captain Hull, "but, I tell you, Dacres, I will trouble you for that hat."

The *Constitution* headed for home. Hull had the proof he needed to convince the politicians the U.S. Navy could fight. The *Constitution* also had one other thing as it returned to Boston. During the height of the battle when the British were only a few feet away, they fired a cannon at the *Constitution's* side. The cannon ball hit the American ship's heavy oak sides and bounced off. An American sailor shouted across to the British telling them to give up, the *Constitution* was too strong for them to hurt. "Her sides are made of iron," he shouted. Hull had the first great victory for the U.S. Navy, and its most famous ship had her new nickname, "Old Ironsides." □