

Lesson Forty-Five

“Old Ironsides”

LESSON IDEA

To dramatize the courage and initiative shown by American seamen during the War of 1812, and to show how their expertise and daring won respect for our nation.

PREPARATION

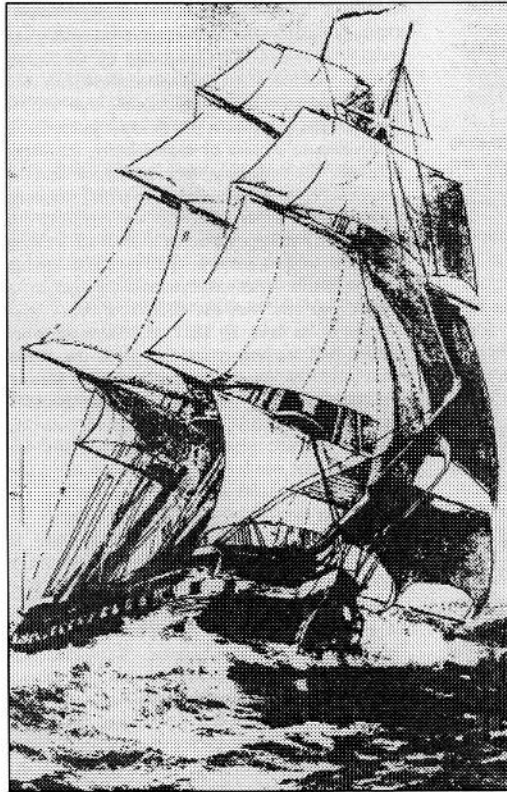
Be prepared to explain such terms and phrases as “spar,” “rigging,” “loading cannon with double shot,” and “to strike a ship’s colors.” Read the “During The Week” section and have the suggested books on hand.

OLD IRONSIDES. Do you know what the term means? Have you heard it before? It is the nickname for a famous sailing ship with the proud name *Constitution*. Now more than 200 years old, “Old Ironsides” is anchor in the harbor at Charlestown, a section of Boston, Massachusetts annexed during the 1800s. One of the first things discovered by the thousands of Americans who visit her each year is that her sides are not made of iron. Indeed, far from it. She is a wooden ship, one of the 16 seagoing vessels that comprised the backbone of our Navy when the U.S. declared war on Great Britain in 1812. The English captains sneered at the proud vessel, describing her as “a bundle of pine boards.” They soon learned, however, that although she was made of wood, she fought as if made of iron. Here’s the story.

You will recall that in the early 1800s Napoleon Bonaparte was at war with almost all of Europe, especially England. The British Navy, as “mistress of the seas,” had more than a thousand ships but never enough sailors. To fill out their crews, English warships stopped and boarded American merchant ships, selected the sailors they wanted,

and kidnapped them. The naval term for the process was “impressment”; it had been practiced for years.

To give impressment a cloak of respectability, the English claimed that the Americans they kidnapped were “deserters from British ships.” For an impressed American to prove otherwise was extremely difficult, if not impossible. Because of the common language and ancestry, he undoubtedly looked and acted British. What usually ended the argument, if there was one, was a British pistol aimed at his head. By 1811, the American government had received complaints from the families and friends of more than 6,000 impressed seamen.



Impressment (kidnapping) was only one of the reasons the United States declared war on Great Britain in 1812. Can you remember others? [Remind family members of the arbitrary restrictions on U.S. trade with other nations, and the lack of respect for our rights as a neutral nation.]

A few months after war was declared, the American frigate *Constitution*, commanded by Captain Isaac Hull, met the British frigate *Guerriere* off the coast of Massachusetts. For an hour the ships maneuvered for position in a stiff northwest wind and high seas. (Remember, they were completely dependent on the breeze and their naval expertise movement. There were no

engines or propellers to aid them.) About dusk they came alongside each other.

“Not a cannon to be fired till I give the word,” cried Captain Hull. “Double shot the guns!”

“May we not begin?” shouted his first officer as shot from the *Guerriere* came tearing through

the rigging. The men were becoming impatient, but Captain Hull waited until he could aim every gun at the enemy frigate.

"Now, boys, give it to them!" he shouted at the top of his voice when the time was right.

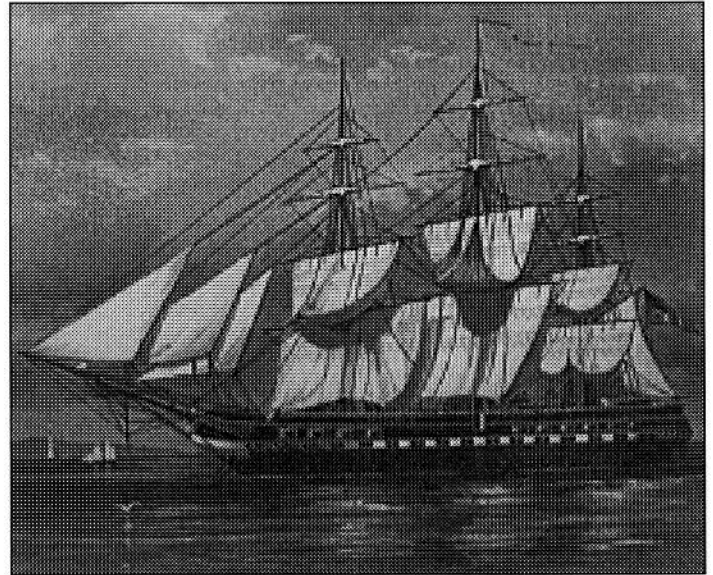
And give it they did. Within 30 minutes the *Guerriere* was a shattered wreck and in danger of sinking. Not a spar was standing, and 79 of her crew were killed or wounded.

The *Constitution*, the ship the British ridiculed as a "bundle of pine boards," was virtually unharmed. It was as if her sides were made of iron rather than wood. Hull took the surviving English sailors on board before setting fire to the *Guerriere*, which exploded and sank within minutes.

"The victory of the *Constitution* cannot be overrated either in its immediate or later effects," wrote historian John Clark Ridpath. "Coming at a time when the country was despondent over the surrender of (Fort) Detroit, when Americans had lost faith in themselves and doubted their own courage, when the nation lacked standing abroad and was despised by the enemy, the completeness of victory restored confidence at home, and secured for the United States consideration among the nations of the world. In England the news was received with astonishment which amounted almost to despair. Were the hitherto invincible British frigates to be conquered by a few fir-built ships flying a piece of striped bunting at the masthead?

"Wherein was the secret of this remarkable success?" asked Ridpath. He provides a partial answer by comparing the two ships. "The *Constitution* was longer, wider, better in lines and construction, of deeper draft than the *Guerriere*, and the armament was heavier, the crew more numerous, officers and men more efficient, man for man, yet these facts alone could not account for the completeness of defeat. Beyond all these was the fact that the Americans were fighting to avenge their outraged rights and insulted flag."

Other American victories followed rapidly in the fall and winter of 1812. The American sloop-of-war *Wasp* met the British brig *Frolic* about 600 miles off the Virginia coast. During the ensuing fierce battle, the vessels ran afoul of each other. The *Wasp*, commanded by Captain Jacob Jones, lost her main topmast, but the American gunners



OLD IRONSIDES

When the *Constitution* was launched in 1797, her builder spoke of "...conducting into the ocean, a powerful agent of national justice, which hope dictates may become the just pride and ornament of the American name." His faith in *Constitution* was soon justified. Her most celebrated victory was against the frigate *Guerriere* in 1812. She reduced the proud British ship to a helpless hulk, while escaping without any serious damage herself. A Yankee gunner who saw a shot bounce off *Constitution's* oaken planking shouted: "Her sides are made of iron!" Thus she earned the name by which she is best known to millions — "Old Ironsides." Today you can visit her in the harbor at Charlestown, a part of Boston, Massachusetts.

continued to pour a raking fire onto the *Frolic's* deck. The British struck their colors, and when the Americans boarded there was not a sailor on deck; only the officers, who surrendered. The surviving sailors had scurried below to escape the deadly fire.

The week after Captain Jones' victory, the frigate *United States*, commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur, attacked the British frigate *Macedonian* near the Canary Islands. There was a heavy sea and the battle began at long range, the *Macedonian* taking a beating from the heavy American guns. The outcome for the British was no better at closer range. Decatur raked the *Macedonian*, disabled her rigging, and dismantled her guns. Within two hours the British surrendered after losing more than 100 men.

During that same month, the *Constitution* (now commanded by Commodore Bainbridge) gave the

