# Naval History: August 19th, 1812

## Description

On this date 195 years ago, a historical naval battle took place, which spawned a legendary nickname for one of the first warships built in the course of our nationâ€™s history: â€œOld Ironsides.â€•




Painting by Michael Corne

Captain Issac Hull, commanding USS CONSTITUTION, would take on the British Frigate *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨re* (44 guns), commanded by 28 year old, but experienced, Captain James Dacres, in a short and furious engagement in the vicinity of 41Ã‚Â° 42â€™N 55Ã‚Â°48â€™W, approximately 750 miles East of Boston.The CONSTITUTIONâ€™s crew sighted sails at 2PM and the ships closed for the deadly engagement. Shortly before 6PM, at the CONSTITUTION closed within gun range of the British ship, the *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨re* began firing some long range shots. Captain Hull held fire, even after having taken a hit in a gun port at 6PM.When the CONSTITUTION was broadside to the *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨re* at a distance of about 75 yards, First Lieutenant Morris asked â€œShall we fire now?â€• At 6:05PM, Captain Hull replied to LT Morris with â€œYes, sir, you may now fire.â€•

Double shotted loads spoke in a single thunderous voice from the side of CONSTITUTION, and the entire structure of the ship shook from the blast, and the crew gave a triple cheer that was clearly heard aboard *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨re*. The result of this fire discipline? When the smoke cleared, the *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨reâ€™s* mizzenmast had ruptured just above the main deck and falling into the sea and the mainyards were shot away, taking the sails, too. The American sailors gave another triple cheer.

It was in this interval, when an American sailor saw a British 18lb cannon ball bounce off the Shipâ€™s side and said â€œher sides are made of iron!â€• The nickname for the USS CONSTITUTION was born.

Captain Hull maneuvers his vessel into position, providing the Marine sharpshooters the opportunity to fire at the confused British crew, then a second, close range broadside was loosed with the same fury against the enemy. The ships closed and became entangled, and boarding parties was called for. Stern chasers and bow guns were employed at close range, and the CONSTITUTIONâ€™s main batteries could still fire into the *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨re*. The heaving and plunging of the heavy seas finally tore the shipâ€™s loose from each other.

The *HMS GuerriÃƒÂ¨re* was dismasted and most of her officerâ€™s out of action, dead or wounded. Captain Dacres struck his colors at 6:30PM.

In 25 minutes, the US Navy won a victory, aided and abetted by the foresight of Joshua Humphreys. How? That will be the subject of tomorrowâ€™s Monday Maritime Matters post.

This account was derived from the book â€œSix Frigatesâ€• by Ian Toll. The details of the battle covered there are presented in far greater detail.

In the mean time, the Historical Naval Ships Association site for the USS CONSTITUTION is here. Points of interest there include that the below poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes kept her from the scrap yards in 1830, and the money of school children collected in 1927 restored her to her 1812 condition.

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Old Ironsides

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannonâ€™s roar; â€”
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more.
Her deck, once red with heroesâ€™ blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying oâ€™er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victorâ€™s tread,
Or know the conquered knee; â€”
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!

Another website found while researching this material was The Captainâ€™s Clerk, a site set up as â€œan archive specifically created to contain historically accurate stories and other information on that fabled frigate, the USS Constitution (â€œOld Ironsidesâ€•).â€•

Come back tomorrow to read how another field of my academic background is put to use to tell more of this story!

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