

## 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

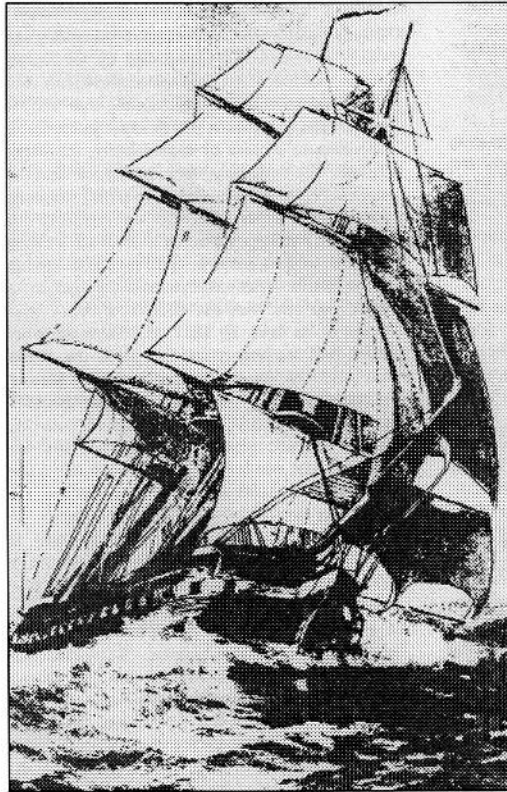
Be prepared to explain such terms and phrases as “spar,” “rigging,” “loading cannon with double shot,” and “to strike a ship’s colors.” Read the “During The Week” section and have the suggested books on hand.

**O**LD 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

