

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

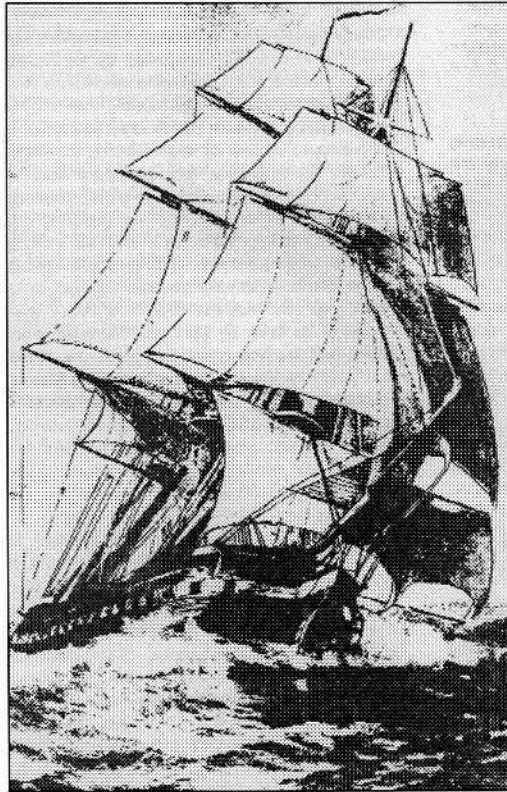
Be prepared to explain such terms and phrases as “spar,” “rigging,” “loading cannon with double shot,” and “to strike a ship’s colors.” Read the “During The Week” section and have the suggested books on hand.

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.

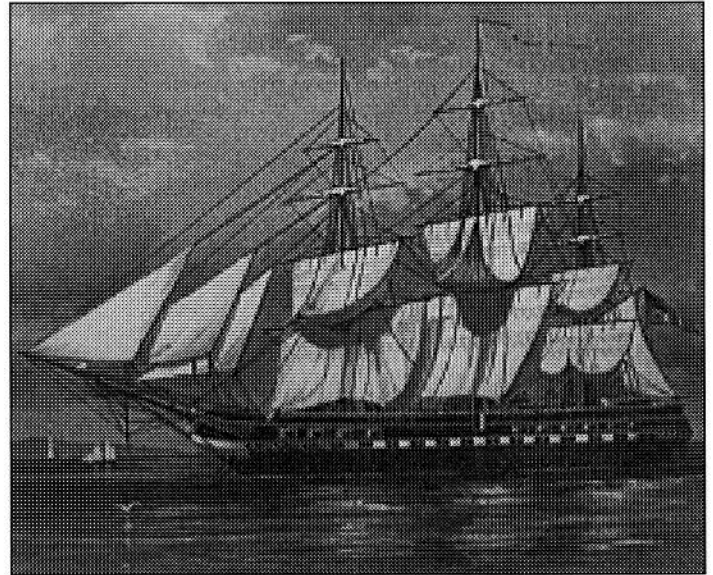
And give it they did. Within 30 minutes the *Guerriere* was a shattered wreck and in danger of sinking. Not a spar was standing, and 79 of her crew were killed or wounded.

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

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Why was the United States so ill-prepared for war in 1812? When was the U.S. Navy founded? What effect did the Louisiana Purchase have on the war? Why was New Orleans so important to so many nations?

These are some of the questions that you may wish to explore by delving more deeply into the background of the war. Answers may be found in Ridpath's *History Of The United States, Volume VII*, or in biographies of the Presidents — Thomas Jefferson and James Madison — who guided American foreign policy before and during the conflict. Especially useful are *Thomas Jefferson* by John T. Morse Jr. and *James Madison* by Sydney H. Gav. Ridpath's *History* is out-of-print, but may be available at a local library. The Madison and Jefferson biographies are in print.

British frigate *Java* a taste of superior American seamanship off the coast of Brazil. It was a fierce engagement for both. The *Java* had every mast shot away and her hull torn with shot. The bodies of more than 200 sailors either killed or wounded littered her deck. The *Constitution* also suffered severe damage, but held out until the British captain struck his colors. It was the fourth American victory within six months, and the second for the "bundle of pine boards." The *Constitution* has since been popularly known as "Old Ironsides." Is the nickname appropriate? Why?

The American naval victories compensated, at least in part, for the defeats suffered the army along the Canadian and western frontiers. Do you recall the names of the three strategic frontier forts that were surrendered virtually without a fight in during the first few months of the war? [As noted in Lesson 43, they were at Detroit, Michillimackinac, and Dearborn (now Chicago, Illinois).]

Skilled leadership, or lack of it, was the determining factor in each victory or defeat. The British might ridicule certain U.S. army generals for their blunders and retreats; but they were forced to admit that America was a worthy adversary at sea. Slowly but surely, many leaders in Europe began to realize that a nation was springing up on the other side of the Atlantic that would soon challenge England, the "mistress of the seas," for ocean supremacy.

One of America's most powerful weapons was her privateers. Can anyone define that term? [Be sure family members do not confuse "privateer" with "pirate."] A privateer was a privately owned merchant ship, outfitted with guns, and authorized by the government to subdue and seize enemy ships and their cargoes. The cargoes could then be sold, with the profit divided amongst the crew as the captain saw fit. Two percent of the net profit, however, was set aside in a fund for widows, orphans, and disabled seamen. To become a privateer, a ship owner applied for a "letter of marque," or license, from the government.

Privateering was a practical solution to many problems. It added ships and skilled seamen to America's naval forces without bankrupting the already overburdened national treasury. And it enabled sea captains and merchants to not only strike back at the enemy that had ruined their businesses, but also to earn a living. In short, it was good for business and good for the country.

During war's two years, British ships and cargoes worth many millions of dollars were captured or destroyed by privateers. The incidents were reported by newspapers throughout the young nation, and accounts were eagerly read by citizens thirsting for news of British defeats. In October of 1814, the 1,200th capture was recorded as follows:

Brig, Nancy, from Liverpool for Halifax laden with dry goods, captured by the Portsmouth, of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, divested of 318 bales and packages of goods invoiced at 27,000 pounds sterling, and ordered in. This is a great prize well accounted for, as the privateer with her rich spoils has safely arrived.

The effect of American privateering on the British can be judged from a news item that appeared in a Canadian paper on July 20, 1812, only one month after war was declared:

American privateers are swarming round our coast and in the Bay of Fundy. Hardly a day passes but we hear of some captures by them. —Indeed, so numerous are the privateers around the coast that we consider it

very imprudent for any vessel to sail from this port unless under convoy.

Privateering, needless to say, was a risky, dangerous business. Many American sea captains were killed or imprisoned, and their ships captured or scuttled, before the war ended. Do you think the owners of shipping lines would be willing to take such risks today? [Encourage a discussion about individual responsibility and the contemporary attitude that Americans have toward their government. Questions that could be raised include: What do we Americans expect our government to do for us today? How much are we willing to do for ourselves? Is dependence on government for social security, medical care, and welfare, indicative of a truly free nation?]

Concluding Thought

When America declared war on Great Britain in 1812, many Europeans expected the new nation to crumble like "a bundle of pine boards." Instead they saw the United States withstand the onslaught and emerge from the war stronger than before. The Constitution, that unique document which established the new American Government, also seemed to be made of iron. Like the ship that bears the name, it, too, could have rightfully been called "Old Ironsides."

Looking Ahead

One final story about the War of 1812 needs to be told: the battle of New Orleans, where General Andrew Jackson met and conquered an army of 10,000 British soldiers and sailors with a wall of cotton and a will of iron. We will review that crucial event in U.S. history next week.

DURING THE WEEK

Since reading historical novels is an excellent way to develop an appreciation for history, you may wish to add three about the War of 1812 to your family library: *The Lively Lady and Captain Caution*, both by Kenneth Roberts, and *The Dawn's Early Light* by Walter Lord. Encourage family members to read at least one of the books during the coming month. All three titles are in print.