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“OLD IRONSIDES” CAPTURES HMS GUERRIÈRE:  
NORTH ATLANTIC, AUGUST 1812

## *Moses Smith: from Naval Scenes* in the Last War

At the outset of the war, the U.S. Navy consisted of just seventeen ships. The pride of the fleet was its six frigates, of which *Constitution* was one of the finest. (Built in Boston and launched in 1797, she was rated for 44 guns, though during the war she was fitted with as many as 55.) On July 16–19, 1812, under the able command of Captain Isaac Hull, the nephew and adopted son of General William Hull, *Constitution* elegantly eluded five ships of the Halifax squadron in a slow-motion chase through the waters off New Jersey. One month later, on August 19, she was about 750 miles east of Boston when Hull received intelligence that the British frigate *Guerrière* (49 guns), under the command of Captain James R. Dacres, was nearby. Hull's pursuit and capture of *Guerrière* was later recounted by Moses Smith, a crewman who published his memoirs in 1846.

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HAVING learned which way the *Guerrière* was steering when last seen, we crowded all sail in that direction. We steered a north-east course for several hours, until the morning of the 19th of August, 1812. This was the day of the battle.

We now changed our course, and steered south-east, with a good breeze. At ten o'clock, A.M., the lookout cried:

‘Sail ho!’

‘Where away?’ inquired the lieutenant in command.

‘Two points off the larboard bow, sir!’ was the reply.

Hull had now come on deck. His first order was to a midshipman:

‘Mr. German! take the glass and go aloft. See if you can make out what she is.’

German was soon above us, looking intently in the direction named.

‘What do you think?’ asked Hull, with animation.

‘She’s a great vessel, sir! Tremendous sails.’

‘Never mind,’ coolly added Hull. ‘You can come down, sir.’

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Mr. Adams,' addressing another officer, 'call all hands. Make sail for her!'

But before all hands could be called, there was a general rush on deck. The word had passed like lightning from man to man; and all who could be spared, came flocking up like pigeons from a net bed. From the spar deck to the gun deck, from that to the berth deck, every man was roused and on his feet. All eyes were turned in the direction of the strange sail, and quick as thought studding-sails were out, fore and aft. The noble frigate fairly bounded over the billows, as we gave her a rap full, and spread her broad and tall wings to the gale.

The stranger hauled his wind, and laid to for us. It was evident that he was an English man-of-war, of a large class, and all ready for action. In one of her topsails we read these words:

‘NOT THE LITTLE BELT.’

We understood this to mean that the ship we were now approaching was not the ‘Little Belt’ which had been previously attacked. But we knew that very well; and subsequent events proved that they might have saved themselves the trouble of telling us of it. We saw it was the vessel we wanted to meet, not the ‘Little Belt,’ but the big *Guerriere*, of thirty-nine guns.

As we came up she began to fire. They was evidently trying to rake us. But we continued on our course, tacking and half tacking, taking good care to avoid being raked. We came so near on one tack, that a 18 lb. shot came through us under the larboard knight-head, striking just abaft the breech of 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.

Another stray shot hit our foremast, cutting one of the hoops in two. But the mast was not otherwise injured, and the slight damage was soon repaired.

Hull was now all animation. He saw that the decisive moment had come. With great energy, yet calmness of manner, he passed around among the officers and men, addressing to them words of confidence and encouragement.

‘Men!’ said he, ‘now do your duty. Your officers cannot have

entire command over you now. Each man must do all in his power for his country.'

At this moment a man was killed on our spar deck. He had run away from us, and was only returned about a fortnight. He fell by the side of long Tom, and never rose again.

Hull determined on closing with the enemy.

'Why don't you fire?' said he.

'We can't get our guns to bear, as she now lies,' was the answer.

'Never mind, my boys!' said he to the men. 'You shall have her as close as you please. Sailing master! lay her along side!'

We came up into the wind in gallant style. As we fell off a little the *Guerriere* ranged by us her whole length.

The stars and stripes never floated more proudly than they did at that moment. All was silent beneath them, save the occasional order from an officer, or the low sound of the movement of our implements of war. Every man stood firm at his post.

'No firing at random!' cried Hull in a subdued tone of voice. 'Let every man look well to his aim.'

This was the pride of American seamen. Correctness in taking aim did more than anything else in securing the naval victories of the last war.

A shot from the enemy now struck the spar deck, and word was passed that a man was killed.

The long Tom had been capsized, and Ike Kingman got a hoist. But jumping up, with a slap of the hand he said to himself, 'take that.'

'Now close with them!' cried Hull, raising his voice to its sternest note of command, so that it could be heard on the enemy's decks.

'Along side with her, sailing-master.'

A whole broadside from our guns followed this command. The *Constitution* shook from stem to stern. Every spar and yard in her was on a tremble. But no one was hurt by the recoil of the guns, though several were made deaf by the noise. We instantly followed the thunder of our cannon with three loud cheers, which rang along the ship like the roar of waters, and floated away rapidly to the ears of the enemy.

This was a Yankee style which the British had not adopted. The English officers often spoke of it to ours, after the war was over. They said they were astonished at the spirit of our men in the toil and heat of the battle. Amid the dying and the dead, the crash of timbers, the flying of splinters and falling of spars, the American heart poured out its patriotism with long and loud cheers. The effect was always electrical, throughout all the struggle for our rights.

When the smoke cleared away after the first broadside, we saw that we had cut off the mizzen mast of the *Guerriere*, and that her main-yard had been shot from the slings. Her mast and rigging were hanging in great confusion over her sides, and dashing against her on the waves.

This discovery was followed by cheers from the Constitution, and the cry;

‘Huzza, boys! We’ve made a brig of her! Next time we’ll make her a sloop!’

On board the *Guerriere* was an American, by the name of Ben Hodges. As the battle commenced he appealed to the captain:

‘That is an American frigate,’ said he; ‘and I cannot fight against my country.’

How different this from the course of many an Englishman during the war! It was a feeling which the commander of the *Guerriere* respected.

‘Go below, my man,’ said he. ‘Go into the cockpit. You may be of assistance there.’

Hodges obeyed the order. As he stood by one of the surgeons, a voice said:

‘I don’t see that we’ve much to do, after all.’

‘Hold on a bit sir,’ responded Hodges. ‘The Yankees haven’t begun it. I’m thinking, sir, you’ll have plenty to do.’

This was just as the action was commencing. In a moment a red glare followed.

‘There!’ cried Ben. ‘They’ve begun. Now, look out.’ He had hardly spoken before fifteen or twenty wounded men were tumbled into the cockpit.

‘Your words were true enough, Ben,’ said one of the surgeons as he took up a knife. ‘Here’s work for us—and plenty of it, too.’

The *Guerriere* returned our fire with spirit—but it passed too high, and spent its force among our light spars, rigging and sails. Our fore-royal truck was shot away, with two pair of halyards; the flag was hanging down tangled on the shivered mast in the presence of the enemy. This sight inspired one of our men, familiarly called Dan Hogan, to the daring feat of nailing the standard to the mast. He was a little Irish chap, but brim-full of courage. Without a word from any one, he sprang into the rigging and was aloft in a moment. He was soon seen, under the fire of the enemy, who saw him too, at the topmast height, clinging on with one hand, and with the other making all fast, so that the flag could never come down unless the mast came with it. The smoke curled around him as he bent to the work; but those who could see him, kept cheering him through the sulphury clouds. He was soon down again, and at his station in the fight.

Several shot now entered our hull. One of the largest the enemy could command struck us, but the plank was so hard it fell out and sank in the waters. This was afterwards noticed, and the cry arose:

‘Huzza! Her sides are made of iron! See where the shot fell out!’

From that circumstance the name of the *Constitution* was garnished with the familiar title:

#### ‘OLD IRONSIDES.’

By this title she is known around the world.

Very soon after the battle commenced, Lieutenant Bush fell, mortally wounded. Lieutenant Morris received a wound in his chest; but he bore himself bravely through until we won the day. Lieutenant Wardsworth came nobly forward, and filled the place made vacant by death with great honor to himself and advantage to the ship.

The braces of both ships were now shot off. The *Guerriere* swung round into our mizzen rigging, so that a part of her laid right over our taffrail. One might see the whites of the eyes, and count the teeth of the enemy. Our stern guns were pouring in upon them, so that we raked the ship fore and aft. Every shot told well. In a few moments the foremast was gone, and our prediction was fulfilled. The great *Guerriere* had become a

sloop. Soon after the mainmast followed, rendering her a complete wreck. In the fall of the masts some of our boats were swept off, but the Constitution herself was hardly touched, except in some of the yards and sails. Both ships kept firing constantly—our guns continuing to do the most fearful execution.

One of the lieutenants now asked the captain if he should call the boarders?

‘No!’ replied Hull, ‘No! We can take her without losing so many lives.’

The enemy seemed to have been expecting us to board him. He had placed two cannonades on the bowsprit, in such a manner as to sweep off our men as they should attempt to board. These were loaded to the muzzle with musket balls in canvas bags, and would have cut us down like a flock of sheep.

We were preparing for an attack in another quarter, when the *Guerriere* suddenly dropped to the leeward, and fired a gun for assistance. They tried to haul their colors down; but every man who could be seen attempting it, was shot dead from the tops of the Constitution. We were determined to give them an opportunity to be convinced that we would defend our country’s rights to the last; and, besides, we thought these repeated attempts to haul down the flag were intended to deceive us—for we saw the men as busy as ever in continuing the action. I heard the powder boy nearest me on board the *Guerriere* call to another:

‘Work away, there! Huzza! She’ll soon be ours!’

The women they had with them were engaged in passing powder, and other munitions of war. Amid such activity on the decks of the enemy, courage and prudence demanded that we should be active on our own.

As an intended insult, the English had hoisted a puncheon of molasses on their main stay, and sent out word:

‘Do give the Yankees some switchel. They will need it, when they are our prisoners.’

But we made a very different use of this molasses from what they intended. Our shooting at hogsheads in the Chesapeake Bay, was now turned to good account. We soon tapped their sweet stuff for them, in a way which they little thought of. The Yankee shot tasted the English molasses, and not the Yankee

lips. We made the decks of the *Guerriere* so slippery, that her men could hardly stand! They had more switchel prepared for them than they knew what to do with.

The action was now nearly at its close. The firing had become less frequent on both sides. All felt the necessity of proceeding at once to repair damages. But we dare not trust the enemy. Notwithstanding his disabled condition, it was evident he would attack us again, the first opportunity. His men were still numerous—his ammunition was but partly spent, and his guns had been cleared away from the lower decks, so as to work to the best advantage.

We sent a boat on board, but could get no satisfaction. His colors were down—but still there was danger of his attacking us unawares. This inspired a determined spirit on board the *Constitution*.

‘Let’s sink them!’ was the cry that ran along our decks—for we felt that we were deceived.

At this moment Captain Dacres appeared in one of our boats, and immediately surrendered himself as a prisoner of war. We did not have any switchel prepared for him as he came on board, because we thought he had had enough already. The delivery of his sword to Hull by Dacres was a scene never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it.

As he placed the hilt in the hand of Hull, his first remark was:

‘Captain Hull! what have you got for men?’

‘O,’ replied Hull, with a sly smile, ‘only a parcel of green bush-whackers, Captain Dacres!’

‘Bush-whackers! They are more like tigers than men. I never saw men fight so. They fairly drove us from our quarters.’

We remained by the *Guerriere* all night. The prisoners were taken out and humanely disposed of. We immediately set ourselves at work, repairing damages. Two anchor stocks welded on the foremast, that had been injured by the stray shot, made that as good as new. In one hour’s time, we had the gallant frigate as trim as she was when the fight began. But it was not so with the *Guerriere*. The Yankee wounds made in her sides were incurable. She was kept afloat near us, but with six feet of water in her hold. Lieutenant Reed had command. The prisoners were set at the pumps, but they could not all keep her

free. She was soon reported to be in a sinking condition, and we hastened to get all the men out of her.

Some of the captives came on board of us very badly wounded. Their sufferings were greater than can be described, or even imagined. One poor fellow had his under jaw shot off; and while we were watching him, he bled to death. Others, deprived of arms and legs, lingered in the greatest torture, until death put an end to their pains.

There was one of our men—Dick Dunn—who bore the amputation of his leg with a fortitude I shall always bear in mind. ‘You are a hard set of butchers,’ was all he said to the surgeon, as his torn and bleeding limb was severed from his body. Others, whom I could name, bore their amputations equally well. Some of these brave defenders of the nation are among my friends; and I sometimes meet them stumping it through life. In the midst of all this suffering, Captain Hull was frequently found tendering the consolations needed in such an hour, and showing his humanity to the best advantage. He even looked more truly noble, bending over the hammock of a wounded tar, than when invading and conquering the enemy.

In spite of all the efforts to keep her afloat, we now saw that the *Guerriere* was rapidly sinking. A council of war was held on board the *Constitution*, and the decision was that she should be blown up. It was a moment of the deepest interest. After removing every thing thought necessary to be saved, we put a slow match to the magazine, and left her.

There was something melancholy and grand in the sight. Although the frigate was a wreck, floating about a mastless hulk at the sport of the waves, she bore marks of her former greatness. Much of her ornamental work had been untouched; and her long, high, black sides rose in solitary majesty before us, as we bade her farewell. For years she had been the house of thousands of human beings; for years she had withstood the shocks of the winds, the billows and the battle; for years she had borne the insignia of English valor to different and distant climes. But her years were now ended; her course was run; she was about to sink into the deep ocean forever.

Captain Dacres stood by our taffrail as we squared away from the *Guerriere*. He seemed to brush away a tear from his



dark eye, as he took the last look of the vessel he had so lately commanded. But whatever may have been his feelings, it must be admitted that he had done his own duty well—and his men had defended their vessel to the last.

At the distance of about three miles we hove to, and awaited the result. Hundreds of eyes were stretched in that one direction, where the ill-fated *Guerriere* moved heavily on the deep. It was like waiting for the uncapping of a volcano—or the bursting up of a crater. Scarcely a word was spoken on board the *Constitution*, so breathless was the interest felt in the scene.

The first intimation we had that the fire was at work was the discharge of the guns. One after another, as the flame advanced, they came booming towards us. Roar followed roar, flash followed flash, until the whole mass was enveloped in clouds of smoke. We could see but little of the direct progress of the work, and therefore we looked the more earnestly for the explosion—not knowing how soon it might occur. Presently there was a dead silence; then followed a vibratory, shuddering motion, and streams of light, like streaks of lightning running along the sides; and the grand crash came! The quarter deck, which was immediately over the magazine, lifted in a mass, broke into fragments, and flew in every direction. The hull, parted in the centre by the shock, and loaded with such masses of iron and spars, reeled, staggered, plunged forward a few feet, and sank out of sight.

It was a grand and awful scene. Nearly every floating thing around her went down with the *Guerriere*. Scarcely a vestige remained to tell the world that such a frigate had even swept the seas. We immediately squared away, and were again under a crowd of sail for our native land.

Thus ended the capture of the *Guerriere*.