

# *Constitution vs Guerriere*

## A Classroom Skit

This skit recounts the battle between USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere* using many of the actual words said by men who took part in it. It takes approximately ten minutes. You will need six volunteers to read the parts of the characters, a narrator, and a person to hold up the signs that indicate opportunities for audience participation.

### **Preparation:**

- Create 8 copies of the script
- Print off the three signs below for the sign holder
- Print off the name pages below and use a hole punch and string to create name tags for each character.
- Choose a Narrator (often the teacher)
- Choose 6 students to be the characters of the play
- Choose someone to hold up signs for the audience
- If desired, use the Search in *A Sailor's Life for Me* Educator Resources to find directions on making officer hats and images of sailor's uniforms for costuming ideas (ie neckerchiefs and hats)

### **Set Up:**

- Divide the crew into Americans and British and have each group stand on either side of the Narrator. Use the name pages below to indicate who is who.
- Instruct your sign holder to hold the appropriate sign up high for all to see when the time comes
- Give each student a copy of the script to read along.

**Narrator:**

In the early 1800s, the British had the most powerful navy in the world. They were at war with France and they needed men and supplies. As a result, they began interfering with America's ability to trade overseas by capturing American ships, stealing our cargo, and kidnapping American sailors. In 1812, the United States declared war on England.

USS *Constitution's* most famous battles took place during the War of 1812. Today, we are going to act out the battle during which she earned her nickname *Old Ironsides* – the battle between USS *Constitution* and the British frigate HMS *Guerriere*.

**Narrator:**

The rest of you can help – whenever we hold up a sign – everyone read it. Let's try it now.

**(HOLD UP CARD #1 – then CARD #2, then CARD# 3)**

**Everyone:** Boom!

**Everyone:** Hip, hip, huzza!

**Everyone:** Huzza, her sides are made of iron.

**Narrator:**

We also need you to beat a drum by stamping your feet when we call for it. **(HAVE THEM TRY STAMPING)**

**Narrator:**

This play is based on the actual words the sailors on board *Constitution* and *Guerriere* used to describe the battle. Many of them were taken directly from letters and diaries entries. Let's meet the characters now.

**(Have the cast step forward and wave as you read their name.)**

**Narrator:**

On the American side:

- **Moses Smith** is an ordinary seaman
- **Midshipman Henry Gilliam** is an officer-in-training
- **Captain Isaac Hull** is in command of *Constitution*.

On the British side:

- **Captain James Richard Dacres** (*say Day-kers*), **Jr.** is an experienced officer in charge of *Guerriere*.
- **Lieutenant Bartholomew Kent** is second in command
- And, although there were no women on *Constitution*, there were four officer wives on *Guerriere*. **Mrs. Henderson** is the wife of **Boatswain** (*say Bo-sun*) **Robert Henderson**.

**Narrator:**

On August 19, 1812, in heavy seas 800 miles east of Boston, *Constitution* spied a sail on the horizon and set off in chase. Captain Isaac Hull knew that there were enemy ships in the area. **He ordered Constitution be made ready for battle.** To the **beat of a drum, (EVERYONE STAMPS THEIR FEET)** each gun crew manned their cannon.

**Midshipman Gilliam:**

We made chase and cleared the decks for an engagement...at which our crew gave three hearty cheers.

**(HOLD UP CARD #1)**

**Everyone:** Hip, hip, huzza! Hip, hip, huzza! Hip, hip, huzza!

**Narrator:**

As time passed, feelings of excitement, nervousness and anticipation grew amongst the crew.

**Moses Smith:**

We waited impatiently at our guns. It was so quiet I could hear my heart beating in my chest.

**Narrator:**

On board HMS *Guerriere*, the British officers watched the ship approach. They prepared their ship for battle.

**Captain Dacres:**

As we closed within a mile on the Yankee frigate, we hoisted our flag and fired all our starboard guns at *Constitution*.

**(HOLD UP CARD #2 )**

**Everyone:** BOOM!

**Narrator:**

Despite the noise and confusion, *Constitution* **did not** fire back. The crew waited quietly for the Captain's orders. He was asked for permission to fire but refused, saying...

**Captain Hull:**

No firing at random! Let every man look well to his aim.

**Narrator:**

*Guerriere* fired the cannons along her left side.

**(HOLD UP CARD #2 )**

**Everyone:** BOOM!

**Narrator:**

Some of the cannon balls passed through *Constitution's* sails and rigging, some smashed her wooden sides sending splinters into the air. But, surprisingly, **some of the cannon balls hit *Constitution's* sides and were seen BOUNCING OFF!**

**Moses Smith:**

Several shot now entered our hull...but the plank was so hard, the shot fell out and sank in the waters. This was noticed, and someone shouted:

(HOLD UP CARD #3)

**Everyone:** HUZZA! HER SIDES ARE MADE OF IRON!

**Narrator:**

Finally when the **two ships were less than 50 feet apart**, Captain Hull spoke again.

**Captain Hull:**

Not yet — not yet — **fire!**

(HOLD UP CARD #2)

**Everyone:** BOOM!

**Mrs. Henderson:**

...*Constitution* gave that ...broadside...For a moment it appeared as if heaven and earth had struck together; a more terrific shock cannot be imagined!

**Lieutenant Kent:**

*Constitution's* shots pounded away at our hull and masts. I heard a great cracking sound, and before I knew it, our mizzen mast hung over our sides like a fallen tree.

**Mrs. Henderson:**

It was a desperate scene. Wounded men lay in all directions. I quickly joined the other three ladies in passing powder to the guns.

**Narrator:**

*Old Ironsides* fired broadside after broadside at *Guerriere*. **In less than thirty minutes**, HMS *Guerriere* lay still in the water, with great damage to both ship and crew.

**Midshipmen Gilliam:**

By heavens, that ship is ours!

**Lieutenant Kent:**

Our ship was in a sinking condition— and one third of the crew killed and wounded.

**Narrator:**

On board *Guerriere*, Captain Dacres knew that continuing the fight would be useless and would only result in more deaths. He surrendered to Captain Hull. This was the first time (in the history of the world) that a British frigate surrendered to an American frigate.

The Americans took the British as prisoners and placed them under marine guard on board *Constitution*. Both the American and British surgeons worked together to help the injured sailors. Captain Dacres wrote in his report to the English Admiralty...

**Captain Dacres:**

The conduct of Captain Hull and his officers to our men has been that of a brave enemy, the greatest attention being paid to the wounded.

**Narrator:**

*Guerriere* was too badly damaged to bring back to port as a prize. After the British prisoners and supplies were removed, *Constitution's* crew set *Guerriere's* magazine on fire and sunk her into the deep waters of the ocean.

(HOLD UP CARD#2 )

**Everyone:** BOOM!

**Narrator:**

*Constitution's* crew quickly repaired their own Ship and set course for Boston where they were welcomed as heroes.

**Moses Smith:**

When we arrived, everyone in Boston was full of excitement. The roar of the cannon, the shouting of the people and the sounds of music woke up the town as they celebrated our victory.

**Narrator:**

*Constitution's* victory over the powerful British Navy lifted the mood of the American people during the War of 1812. The victory proved to the world that the new American nation was independent and able to defend itself. By defeating *Guerriere*, *Old Ironsides* had ensured herself a place in the history books and in the hearts of the American people.

Let's have one last cheer for *Old Ironsides* and her crew!

(HOLD UP CARD #1 )

**Everyone:** Hip, hip, huzza!

(HAVE THE CAST BOW)

**BOOM**

**HIP, HIP,**

**HUZZA!**

**HUZZA, HER  
SIDES ARE  
MADE OF  
IRON!**

**Moses**

**Smith**

**Midshipman**

**Henry**

**Gilliam**

**Captain  
Isaac Hull**

**Captain James  
Richard Dacres**

**Lieutenant  
Bartholomew  
Kent**

**Mrs.**

**Henderson**