

## Cape Cod Gun Captains Shot Crippled British Frigate

By Albert E. Snow



Joshua Crosby



Captain Isaac Hull



Just 150 years ago today, a Cape Cod gun captain aboard the *USS Constitution*, “Old Ironsides,” fired the shot that downed the mizzen mast of *HMS Guerriere*, made a brig of the three-masted frigate and paved the way for the Briton’s defeat in less than half-an-hour at the hands of Captain Isaac Hull and his men aboard “Old Ironsides,” Today, Albert E. Snow of Orleans tells of that intrepid Cape Codder, Joshua Crosby 3d, an Orleans man who went to sea most of his life, but whose proudest memory was the day his 24-pounder shattered the mizzen of a foe to give America a much-needed victory in the ill-starred War of 1812.

ORLEANS — Joshua Crosby 3d was as typical a Cape Codder as you’d ever find, the fourth generation of his family to live on the Cape. Born in Weeset, Orleans, in 1779, he went to school until he was 13 and deemed fit to farm or go to sea, help support the family. Joshua chose the sea; joining the fishing a fleet that reaped a rich harvest from the Georges Bank. Later Joshua took to cruising in coastal whalers under Captain Edmund Freeman, from Maine to Hatteras.

### His College

The decks of these ships were his school and his college; by 1800, the 21-year-old Cape Codder had made many voyages to European and Mediterranean ports.

In 1804, Joshua came home to marry his childhood sweetheart, Sarah Freeman; the Orleans town clerk, Sam Higgins, listed his name in the records as Captain Joshua Crosby. From then until 1812, Joshua served in the Mediterranean trade aboard Boston and Salem vessels.

By 1812, though, American mariners were in shoal waters. The Napoleonic Wars led hard pressed England to impress American seamen to man the Navy's warships. Spanish, French and English privateers preyed on American merchantmen, The peace-minded President, Thomas Jefferson, declared an embargo that kept American ships rotting in American ports.

### **Self-defense**

U. S. Navy was virtually non-existent, Yankee mariners mounted cannon aboard their ships to fend off privateers, and protect their crews from impressments.

Joshua continued to sail until June of 1812 when his ship, the brig *Leonard*, arrived in Chesapeake Bay, to learn that war with England had been declared. The embargo was being enforced and American shipping was at a standstill. Worse, England had a Navy of 600 fighting ships, 124 of which were ships of the line, the battleship of the day.

The United States had no ships of the line, only three 44-gun frigates (including "Old Iron Sides"), three 38-gun frigates and three little sloops of war mounting 18, 28 and 32 guns.

### **Opportunity Waited**

It was one of those frigates that spelled opportunity and a place in history for Joshua Crosby 3d. He couldn't get a coastal packet from Chesapeake Bay home; the embargo and the British blockade both prevented such voyages. To go overland meant a long and expensive journey.

The *USS Constitution* was lying in Chesapeake Bay, hurriedly readying for sea before the

British blockade could be drawn tight. In command was a Connecticut man from Derby, Isaac Hull.

To Hull, men like Crosby were particularly welcome; in addition to years afloat, they'd had experience with guns while fending off enemy privateers. When Crosby inquired about signing on, Hull promptly enlisted him as a gun captain, put him in charge of a starboard quarter spar deck carronade. Quarterdeck guns and gunners were the best and most important in a ship.

On July 14, 1812, *Constitution* cleared Chesapeake Bay for Boston. The voyage was filled with gunnery drill, target practice and a hair-raising escape from a British squadron.

### **Sailed Without Orders**

Safely in Boston, the impatient Hull decided not to wait for orders from Washington; he took his frigate to sea to raid British commerce off Nova Scotia... not the first man to offer his superiors a choice of a medal or a court-martial.

Off the Maritimes, *Constitution* sank or captured small vessels, and took their crews prisoner.

By Wednesday morning Aug. 19, 1812, the wind had hauled around to a spanking fresh breeze out of the northwest. The fog of the previous night had lifted. A Baltimore privateer was overhauled, and from her, Captain Hull heard that she had been chased most of Tuesday by a large British frigate, he also learned which way the frigate was heading.

Captain Hull ordered his sailing master to crowd on all sail in pursuit, At 2 pm the lookout called, "Sail Ho!" *Constitution* began to bear down upon the enemy who lay with main topsail aback and occasionally wearing (jibing). The British commenced, firing upon *Constitution* at a distance of 2 miles.

### **Colors Set**

At 5:29 pm, *Constitution* set her colors and began ranging alongside the now-recognized British Frigate *Guerriere*, 39 guns, Captain James Richard Dacres, RN. *Guerriere* fired several broadsides with no effect upon *Constitution*.

Captains Hull and Dacres had earlier met in England and had become friends. Dacres at that time bet a hat that if they ever met in combat he would be the winner.

At 6 pm, Hull brought *Constitution* alongside *Guerriere*, in just the position he wanted – to open heavy broadside fire at 40 yards, with both ships running before the wind.

Captain Hull was all animation. He passed among officers and men giving words of confidence and encouragement. “Do your duty men.” “Your officers cannot have entire command of you now, so each man must do his utmost for his country!”

Meantime Crosby kept his gun rained upon *Guerriere*’s mizzenmast, awaiting Captain Hull’s order to fire.

At the order, *Constitution*’s full broadside opened, shaking her from stem to stern.

When the smoke cleared, *Guerriere*’s mizzenmast was seen to have been hit squarely and to fall overboard to starboard. At the same instant, her main yard was also shot from the slings, crashing down upon, her spar deck.

### **Made Her a Brig**

“Hurrah boys, we’ve made a brig, of her! Next broadside we’ll make a sloop of her!”

*Guerriere* returned the fire with spirit but it passed too high, going through *Constitution*’s light spars, rigging and sails.

Thus crippled, *Guerriere* was by then practically a defeated ship since her maneuverability was gone.

Reduced sail power and the dragging mast slowed her, turning her bow to starboard and from *Constitution*.

Now forging ahead, *Constitution* steered sharply across *Guerriere*’s bow to reach the coveted raking position where all *Constitution*’s starboard side guns bore, and where every shot could sweep *Guerriere*’s decks lengthwise, causing great carnage to her spar deck gunners, while at the same time *Guerriere*’s opposing fire was reduced to her few bow guns.

*Constitution*’s headway carried her past *Guerriere*’s bow. As the *Constitution* turned away to regain position for another broadside, *Guerriere*’s bowsprit tangled with *Constitution*’s stern shrouds.

### **Boarders Ready**

In the tangle where both ships were held together, both ships assembled their boarders at the point of contact.

The men were armed with murderous 7 foot long boarding-pikes and cutlasses. U.S. Marines high in *Constitution*’s fighting tops, and both Marines and seamen on deck fired muskets, wounding Captain Dacres. Captain Hull then called off the boarders, realizing he could win, without losing so many lives.

After a few minutes of that, whereupon *Guerriere*’s two remaining masts, her main and foremast, fell from the damaged supporting rigging.

*Constitution*’s 20 inch thick southern live oak sides were not penetrated as *Guerriere*’s hits bounced off or were deflected. Someone in *Constitution*’s crew noting this, called her “Old Iron-sides”, a battle-born name that has clung for 150 years.

At 6:30 pm it was all over and *Guerriere* reduced to a helpless, sinking hulk. The wounded Dacres struck his colors at 7 pm and came aboard *Constitution*, surrendering his sword to Captain Hull.

Captain Hull, remembering the Dacres hat boast of a few years back, said, “I cannot take the blade of so great a foe, but I’ll just trouble you for that fine hat on your head.”

Captain Dacres had 23 killed, 56 badly wounded. Hull’s casualties were seven killed, seven wounded.

As *Guerriere* was too badly hurt and leaking to be sailed or towed into port as the *Constitution*’s prize, Captain Hull took out all her crew, and sea bags, and such stores as he could use, then set fire and brew her up, running a slow-burning match into her powder magazines below her waterline.

### **Left for Boston**

*Constitution* then squared away and hove to, 3 miles off from *Guerriere*, to watch her go, then left the scene immediately for Boston.

Sure enough, the political effect of Hull's victory over the invincible *Guerriere*, was far above its naval importance.

The country which had expected little from its small Navy now united in widespread exultation; so great was the moral effect that a new wave of courage swept the nation to assert her freedom on the seas in a manner to command respect.

*Constitution*, with much damage to sails and rigging, which her crews repaired within 24 hours, but with no hull damage, arrived in Boston Aug. 30.

Boston went wild in excitement. Nothing was too good for the finest crew *Constitution* ever had. However, Captain Hull was subjected to carping critical attack by the Washington Navy Department rocking chair strategists, for not immediately closing with *Guerriere*. Hull answered his critics by pointing out that as he had the wind directly aft, one was as much the weather side as the other,

He drew a diagram, still preserved today, showing how, running before the wind, he bore down upon *Guerriere*, then cannily waiting till both ships were abreast, he ordered his gunners to open fire with *Constitution's* starboard battery at 40 yards range. It was here that Joshua Crosby's expert training and gunnery could not miss,

Crosby remained aboard *Constitution*, leaving Boston Oct, 26, under Captain Bainbridge, returning Boston Feb. 27, 1813, after taking *HMS Java*, 38-guns. During a year's overhaul in Boston, Crosby was sent to the Great Lakes, joining Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry aboard his flagship, *Lawrence*, 20-guns, which helped defeat the British on Lake Erie, Sept. 10, 1813.

### **Took Two Ships**

Again returning to *Constitution*, Crosby sailed Dec. 17, 1814, under Captain Stewart. On that cruise, they took *HMS Levant* and *Cyane* Arriving in Puerto Rico; they got word that peace had been signed Dec 24, 1814, just seven days after their Boston departure.

On May 15, 1814, *Constitution* returned to New York, where Crosby's enlistment expired and he came home to Orleans for a rest.

For years thereafter, Crosby still followed the sea as mate in vessels in the overseas and coastal trade, becoming captain of small coasters.

During 1839, he was appointed keeper of the newly-built Nauset "Three Lights", until relieved years later by Captain Mike Collins.

Congress granted pensions to 1812 veterans in 1855, whereupon Crosby now 76, retired to the farming he had detested in his boyhood.

In old age, a trim spare man, a bit hunched when at ease, he could give the old spine a bracing up to assert dignity. His steel gray-blue eyes were fiery and penetrating. He had a high forehead, long straight nose, ears pierced for tiny gold loop earrings, and dressed in the old-time style.

### **Still Remembered**

He was articulate, talking with his hands, "Mediterranean style", said Captain Caleb Hayden of Weeset, who remembered Captain Joshua very well up to 1861, when Captain Caleb, a mariner, enlisted for the Civil War. The six children of Captain Joshua Crosby and wife Sally all married and raised families, Today their grandchildren are both numerous and important about the Mid-Cape.

The initials J. C. scratched by him in 1803, into a window pane of the Freeman House in Weeset, with the diamond set into the ring given to his prospective bride, is still a reminder of Orleans' intrepid War of 1812 sea fighter, and of "Iron men in wooden ships."