

# USS Constitution Mythical Cruise



**USS Constitution**

This myth of maritime warfare has been around a long time. It can be found in numerous places on the Internet and was published verbatim in Navy News some time back. The story (in italics throughout) basically reads:

*The USS Constitution (Old Ironsides) as a combat vessel carried 48,600 gallons of fresh water for her crew of 475 officers and men. This was sufficient to last 6 months of sustained operations; she carried no evaporators. On 22 July 1798, the USS Constitution set sail from Boston.*

*She left with 475 men, 48,600 gallons of water, 7,400 cannon shots, 11,600 pounds of black powder and 79,400 gallons of rum. Her mission - to harass British shipping.*

*Making Jamaica on 6 October, she took on 826 pounds of flour and 68,300 gallons of rum. Then she headed for the Azores, arriving on 12 November. She provisioned with 550 pounds of beef and 64,300 gallons of Portuguese wine.*

*On 18 November she set sail for England. In the ensuing days she defeated five British Man of War and captured and scuttled 12 English Merchant ships, salvaging only the rum.*

*By 27 January, her powder and shot were exhausted. Unarmed, she made a night raid up the Firth of Clyde. Her Raiding Party captured a whiskey distillery and transferred 40,000 gallons aboard by dawn. Then she headed home.*

*The USS Constitution arrived in Boston on 20 February 1799 with no cannon shot, no food, no rum, no wine, no whiskey and 48,600 gallons of stagnant water.*

We might apply some analysis to this.

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There was indeed – and still is – a USS CONSTITUTION. She is the world’s oldest commissioned warship afloat, with HMS VICTORY claiming the oldest commissioned warship title, being in a graving dock as opposed to water. CONSTITUTION was launched in 1797 to a successful career, fought well in three wars, and is now homeported in Boston.

### **To detail the events noted:**

***The USS Constitution (Old Ironsides) as a combat vessel carried 48,600 gallons of fresh water for her crew of 475 officers and men. This was sufficient to last 6 months of sustained operations; she carried no evaporators.***

Well, obviously as far as the evaporators go, unless the Founding Fathers friends were more clever than we know...48, 600 gallons would give around ½ a gallon a day of water for each ship’s company member over the proposed six-month voyage. However, the water would not have kept that long – in fact water was not drunk in quantity aboard ships, simply because it would not last long enough. For that reason, other beverages which would keep longer were preferred.

The daily ration of liquid other than water for sailors in 1816, records John Winton in Hurrah for the Life of a Sailor, was “half a pint of spirits, or a pint of wine, or a gallon of beer every day”. For the uninitiated, a gallon of beer is eight pints, or very large glasses – the sort served in British pubs – of 500 mls. or about 11 standard glasses of “small beer”; a little lower in alcohol content than the “heavy” beers of today. That would mean that sailors would be able to get reasonably drunk every day, although the effect of this of course would be tempered by the size of the drinker, and whether he was used to used such consumption and how much he had eaten beforehand. Half a pint of spirits is around 250ml, or perhaps a third of a modern bottle. The USN, derived from the British navy in many respects, also followed the run ration tradition, until its demise on September 1, 1862.

***On 22 July 1798, the USS Constitution set sail from Boston.***

That is certainly right. The Constitution Museum lists 1798 July 22 as the ship's "First Sail" However, during the "Quasi-War" with France, she was the Squadron Flagship, from 1799-1801.

She left with 475 men, 48, 600 gallons of water, 7400 cannon shots, 11,600 pounds of black powder and 79,400 gallons of rum. Her mission - to harass British shipping.

If the ship's company were receiving a daily ration of rum this would be .9 of a gallon of rum a day over six months to get through the lot – and the story implies they did. Perhaps however, the ship was planning an open-ended voyage. Human beings cannot consume .9 of a gallon of spirits a day and survive!

A basic problem with the story overall is that the United States was at peace with Britain between 1783 and 1812, so the ship cannot have entered combat with the British Navy in that time. Now, we can if you like, decide that the story has a simple mistake in the date. So when was Britain at war with the United States and USS Constitution also in commission? Obviously in the war of 1812 – in fact the ship fought three battles with British vessels, and won them all. Perhaps the date has been mixed up. The story indeed can be found with a different date. No less a person than the Secretary of the US Navy, the Honorable John H. Dalton War, repeated the tale recently in 1997, at the Years Reunion Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, on 19 September. He mentioned the year of "1812" however. So, let us continue, and digress to some of the other figures.

***CONSTITUTION carried 32 guns of 24lb shot weight, and 20 carronades of 32lb shot weight, plus two 24lb bow chasers.***

If each gun fired together, in a double broadside, that is, each gun firing at once, she would expend 64 shot. "7400 cannon shots" would be enough for 115 double broadsides. Just to be fair we might double that, as when a ship fired a broadside it meant the guns on one side firing, and in fact it was apparently difficult to fire both sides' guns together continually, as there was not enough members of the guns' crews to do this. A basic gun crew was formed for each gun, and further men were transferred backwards and forwards to the opposing guns as necessary. If we say that CONSTITUTION was carrying enough shot for 230 single-sided broadsides, is that figure accurate? NAM Rodgers tells us in *The Wooden Wall* that at "...Finisterre in 1747 the DEFIANCE fired forty-two broadsides in an hour and twelve minutes". Perhaps CONSTITUTION was taking on too much rum and not enough ammunition...

***Making Jamaica on 6 October, she took on 826 pounds of flour and 68,300 gallons of rum.***

In less than three months, even a very enthusiastic and unrestricted ship's company could hardly be expected to have gone through that much rum. Was CONSTITUTION planning on selling it or taking it home? However, before we let them escape back to the no doubt thirsty U.S. Navy, we have a problem getting out of the harbor. Jamaica was then a British colony. If the ship's mission was "to harass British shipping" in 1812, it is doubtful indeed that CONSTITUTION would provision at a British port.

Obviously not, as the forces there would attempt her capture. In any event, there would be no reason for her to reprovision after only a few weeks at sea.

***Then she headed for the Azores, arriving on 12 November. She provisioned with 550 pounds of beef and 64,300 gallons of Portuguese wine.***

***On 18 November she set sail for England. In the ensuing days she defeated five British Man of War and captured and scuttled 12 English Merchant ships, salvaging only the rum.***

There is absolutely no historical record for any of this. But nevertheless, would not CONSTITUTION have put prize crews on these valuable ships and taken them back to a friendly port, where a prize agent could arrange for their sale to give valuable prize-money to the captors? This was an important motivator in those days. In the war of 1812 between Britain and the United States, one famous action between two ships – the British SHANNON and the U.S. CHESAPEAKE - almost did not commence because of a dispute over prize money:

As the two ships closed for battle, the morale aboard the Chesapeake and the Shannon was in startling contrast. As Lawrence ordered his men to their guns, the crew of the Chesapeake refused to comply. Complaining that they hadn't received the prize money due them from earlier engagements, they refused to fight unless they were paid. Lawrence quickly ordered the ship's purser to issue vouchers promising payment to the crew, and only then did they follow orders to man the guns.

Instead of going to Britain as a lone and vulnerable raider, let us see what the USS CONSTITUTION really did. Her war record is readily found and quite straightforward. It may be summed up as:

1812: July 16 – 18. CONSTITUTION escapes a squadron of five British ships by towing and kedging in calm conditions.

1812: Aug. 19. Wins battle against HMS GUERRIERE.

1812: Dec. 29. Wins battle against HMS JAVA.

1813: Overhauled in Boston, but then shut in Boston harbor for eight and a half months by the British blockade.

1814: February-April. Runs the blockade of Boston. Captures the schooner PICTOU and three smaller vessels during cruise to Windward Islands.

1814: Escapes into Marblehead while being chased by two larger British frigates. Returns to Boston for repairs.

1814: Blockaded at Boston for eight months, from April to December. In December 1814: takes advantage of poor weather and escapes.

1815: Feb. 20. Fights British ships CYANE and LEVANT. Captures CYANE; LEVANT surrenders, but British squadron retakes LEVANT.

1815. At war's end, CONSTITUTION anchored in New York on May 15.

Nevertheless, our story has the ship in different straits.

***By 27 January, her powder and shot were exhausted. Unarmed, she made a night raid up the Firth of Clyde. Her Raiding Party captured a whiskey distillery and transferred 40,000 gallons aboard by dawn.***

Very interesting. If she put ashore a raiding party of, say, 200 men, each of them would have had to transfer 200 gallons aboard. If this was done, say, at sunset (around 27 January, say 2000 hours?) and the men worked all night for 10 hours straight, they would have had to move 20 gallons an hour each. If each man could carry four gallons at a time, that would still mean five trips an hour aboard the ship. If she was lying off this would be a mighty effort. Still, a very good Scotch or 20 can inspire great feats....

Perhaps the biggest furphy of the whole story however, is to suppose that a party of Americans could make their way into Scotland and capture the Scottish lifeblood. Given the Scots' attitude to battle, probably all of the Americans would have been met with broadsword and musket and never seen home again.

However, then the ship headed home.

***The USS Constitution arrived in Boston on 20 February 1799 with no cannon shot, no food, no rum, no wine, no whiskey and 48,600 gallons of stagnant water.***

Again, the date is wrong. But, disregarding that, there is no evidence to suggest CONSTITUTION went out of waters near the United States during the war of 1812. The last phrase is significant in pointing to the illogicality of the whole story – why would the ship have stagnant water on board with all its attendant health problems? Even a ship needing ballast can pump through fresh seawater every few days....

Adding up the gallons of rum we can see that CONSTITUTION apparently went through – because there was none left when she supposedly arrived home – 187, 700 gallons of rum and whiskey in seven months; let us say 210 days. That is 894 gallons a day, or 1.9 gallons per man per day. Disregarding the rum supposedly captured from the supposed British merchantman and the Portuguese wine, a consumption of spirits to this magnitude would have meant that no-one would have been able to make it out of their hammock - let alone weigh the anchor, man the yards, haul on the sheets and all of the other myriad of tasks a wind-powered ship needed performed by human labor. Indeed, a liter of rum a day is enough to lay most people low, and if continued day after day would undoubtedly have resulted in the demise of most of the ship's company.

Still, never let the truth get in the way of a good story. -o-o-O-o-o-

[Sources: James Pack, *Nelson's Blood | The Story of Naval Rum*. Naval Institute Press 1982 | Lt. Tom Lewis, *Royal Australian Naval College, Jervis Bay | 16 Aug 2001 ++*]