

# VETERAN'S CORNER

## “Old Ironsides”, World’s Oldest Commissioned Naval Ship, Sails Boston Harbor on Navy’s 239<sup>th</sup> Birthday, Dry Dock Next

BY DALE POTTS

The USS Constitution, nicknamed “Old Ironsides”, commemorated the Navy’s 239th birthday and the ship’s upcoming 217th birthday by sailing around Boston harbor on October 17. More than 500 guests were aboard as the ship blasted off a 21-gun salute off Fort Independence on Castle Island (oldest continuously fortified site of English origin in the United States, built in 1634) and an additional 17 gun salute near the Coast Guard Base, Boston. In addition to the Navy crew of 60 who maintain the ship, there were 150 Navy Chief Petty Officer (E-7) selects who climbed up the masts to man the rigging and sails.

It was this historic sailing warship’s last scheduled harbor tour until 2018 when planned maintenance and restoration are scheduled to be completed in the dry dock at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston. One newspaper story I found on internet misinterpreted dry dock to say that the Constitution was going to be docked on dry land. For those familiar with Maritime activities, a dry dock is a narrow basin or vessel that can be flooded to allow a ship to be floated in, then drained to allow that load to come to rest on a dry platform. Dry docks are used for the construction, maintenance, or repair of ships and other water craft. When work is completed, the basin is flooded again and ship floats out.

I toured the USS Constitution in winter of 1966. It was part of my first weekend liberty, about our eighth week while attending Navy Officer Training School in Newport, Rhode Island. I took Greyhound with a friend to Boston to see a Celtics game, my first live professional sports event. The Celtics had Bill Russell, John Havlicek and K.C. Jones. Bob Cousy had retired and it was prior to Larry Bird but eight members of that 66-67 “Green” team made the Basketball Hall of Fame. I do not remember who the Celtic’s played or if they won but it was all part of my big adventure. My flight to Rhode Island for OCS was my second airplane trip and the first time away from the West Coast. During Vietnam It was highly competitive to get into Navy OCS. My OSC roommate had an engineering degree from an Ivy League School and an MBA from Harvard. I only knew of two other graduates from my college, Humboldt State University, who had gone before me.

### Free Appreciation Breakfast for Veterans on November 10th!

All veterans are invited to enjoy a free appreciation breakfast on Monday, Nov 10 at the Juanita Pohl Center. Seating begins at 8 am. This year’s theme is a “A tribute to Vietnam vets.

The program includes door prizes from local merchants, speakers and videos. The event runs until 9:30 am but you want to be there at 8 am to get in all the fun.

No one will be turned away but will help for planning if you register by Nov 3 at the Pohl Center or on [TualatinOregon.gov](http://TualatinOregon.gov) (put ‘vet breakfast’ in search box). Vets are free, \$6 for non vets. Vets can also register by calling 503 691-3061.

### USS Constitution History

The Constitution is the world’s oldest commissioned naval vessel afloat. A wooden-hulled, three-masted heavy frigate, it was named by President George Washington after the Constitution of the United States of America. Launched in 1794 in Boston, it was one of six frigates being built to combat Barbary pirates who were seizing American merchant ship in the Mediterranean. The Congressional Act funding them stipulated that if peace terms were agreed, construction would be halted. When that happened, John Adams was President. Adams did not believe naval warships were needed. But largely due to George Washington’s persuasion, Congress approved completion of three of the frigates; United States, Constellation and Constitution. To combat the much larger Naval forces of other countries, they were constructed heavier than standard frigates of that period, giving their hulls greater strength. Also their design give them faster speed to escape from larger ships with more guns. It took 60 acres of trees to construct Constitution. Paul Revere forged the copper bolts and breasthooks.

Her first actions were to provide protection for American merchant shipping during the “Quasi-War” with France and Spain (1798-1899) and then went on to help defeat the Barbary pirates in the First Barbary War (1801-05) where American ships and crews were being captured and held for high amounts of ransom. But she is best known for her battle with the British warship HMS Guerriere during the War of 1812 against Great Britain. That is where she gained her famous nickname “Old Ironsides”. Using heavier broadsides and sailing ability, the Constitution had surprised the Guerriere. Adding to their amazement, many of Guerriere’s shot bounced harmlessly off Constitution’s enforced hull. When an American sailor yelled “Huzzah, her sides are made of iron”, the ship acquired her nickname. The Guerriere was badly damaged during the battle and not salvageable. After transferring the British prisoners to the Constitution the next morning, the ship was burned. This victory raised the morale of Americans everywhere. The Constitution also captured many merchant ships and four other British warships, HMS Java, Pictou, Cyane and Levant during that war.

Her nickname has endeared her to American populace and has saved her several times from being decommissioned and scrapped. She continued in service as flagship for the Mediterranean and African squadrons. She circled the globe in the 1840’s, then became a training ship for US Naval Academy during the Civil War. After retired from active service in 1881, she was a receiving ship; housing crewmembers from ships under repair. Constitution was designated a museum ship 1907. In 1934 she completed a three-year, 90-port tour of the nation. She sailed under her own power for her 200th birthday in 1997, and again in August 2012, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of her victory over Guerrie. Constitution toured Boston Harbor four times this year.

Constitution’s mission is to promote understanding of the Navy’s role in war and peace through educational outreach, historic demonstration, and active participation in public events. As a fully commissioned US Navy ship, her crew of 60 active duty Naval officers and sailors participate in ceremonies, educational programs, and special events while keeping the ship open to visitors year round and providing free tours. This assignment is considered special duty in the Navy. Traditionally, the skipper is a Navy Commander. Constitution is berthed at Pier 1 of the former Charlestown Navy Yard, at one end of Boston’s Freedom Trail. The dry dock is adjacent to Pier 1.



USS Constitution vs HMS (British) Guerriere in war of 1812.



USS Constitution vs HMS Guerriere.



USS Constitution in Boston Harbor on July 4th, 2014.



Old Ironsides sails in Boston Harbor.

Dale G. Potts has organized and MC’d Tualatin’s Memorial Day observation for the past 12 years. He is a Navy Vietnam vet, serving as the Public Affairs Officer of the Aircraft Carrier USS Yorktown. After active duty, he remained in the reserves, retiring as a Navy Captain (same rank as an Army Colonel). His civilian career was primarily as the Oregon Public Affairs Officer for IRS. Contact Dale at [vet.dale@gmail.com](mailto:vet.dale@gmail.com).



Ensign Dale Potts



Secretary of State John Kerry and British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond visit Constitution on October 9th.



Constitution underway with three top sails.



Constitution in previous dry dock. This allows work to be done on parts of ship normally under water.



Constitution shoots 21 gun salute on 4th of July.