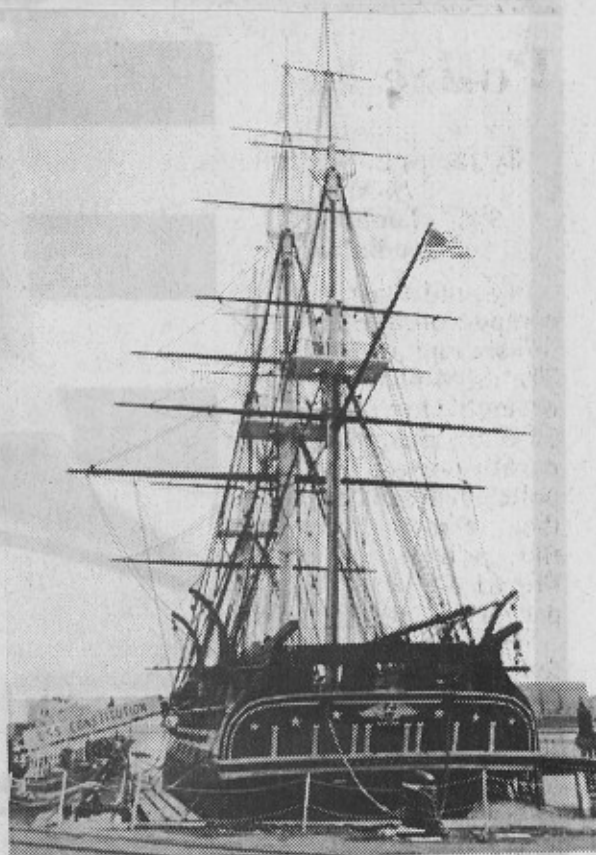


# I served on the USS Constitution



Constitution sailor, Jerry Mullins, displays a ship's boarding pike on left. The 7-foot spear was used to repel boarders from the USS Constitution. In 43 battles, an enemy never successfully boarded the USS Constitution or Old Ironsides, right.

By Jerry Mullins

I served on two ships while I was in the U.S. Navy. One of the ships, the guided missile cruiser USS Belknap (CG-26), is now fish food at the bottom of the Atlantic. The other ship, the USS Constitution, still flies her colors proudly, over two hundred years after she was built.

The Belknap, built in 1963, outlived its worth to the Navy and was used for target practice in the late 1990s. The wooden frigate Constitution, constructed in 1797 by a young nation desperate to protect itself from its European enemies, is the oldest commissioned warship afloat in the world and is moored in Boston Harbor.

Back in 1983, I was a young seaman recruit, fresh out of boot camp. I had heard rumors that volunteers were being sought to serve aboard the historic Constitution, and since I was familiar with the history of "Old Ironsides," I was eager to apply. Much to my surprise, I was chosen

from among dozens of applicants to receive orders to the USS Constitution.

In many ways, my duty aboard the Constitution was similar to serving aboard a modern naval vessel. As a crewmember, I stood watch at all hours of the night and morning, keeping the ship secure and safe. I spent endless hours chipping paint, swabbing the deck, painting, and polishing brass. I was also trained in damage control and fire fighting in order to help protect the ship.

But the most visible part of my job was meeting the public. During the summer months, we had as many as 6,000 people a day visit the Constitution. I and the other 40 crewmembers wore authentic 1812-style uniforms while giving guided tours of the ship. My fellow

crewmembers and I learned about the history of the Constitution and we were able to share the interesting stories with the 750,000 visitors a year who walked the wooden

decks.

In our guided tours of the sailing ship, one misconception my shipmates and I had to correct about the Constitution was that her sides were made of iron. Actually the wooden Constitution received the nickname "Old Ironsides" from our British enemy during the War of 1812. During a fierce battle with the 49-gun HMS Guerriere, cannonballs seemed to bounce off the Constitution's live oak planking. During the heat of the battle, one British soldier shouted, "Her sides are made of iron!"

Built in Boston, the Constitution was launched in October 1797. President Thomas Jefferson chose Joshua Humphreys, a Philadelphia Quaker and technical genius who exerted a tremendous influence on the American Navy, to design it.

Costing \$302,718, the Constitution was as expensive

in real terms to the nation's economy then as an aircraft carrier is today.

The Constitution fought in about 43 combat engagements against the French, the Barbary pirates and later against the British in the War of 1812. It never lost a battle, never was boarded by the enemy, and never had a cannonball go through its sides.

I will never forget the time I spent aboard the Constitution and in Boston, one of America's most historical cities. I met people from all over the world, but I particularly enjoyed teasing our British visitors, our countries' animosity long since forgotten. Serving aboard the USS Constitution and learning about the "old Salts" who lived such a harsh existence aboard the old wooden sailing ships have given me a true appreciation for the sacrifices that have been made in the defense of our country.