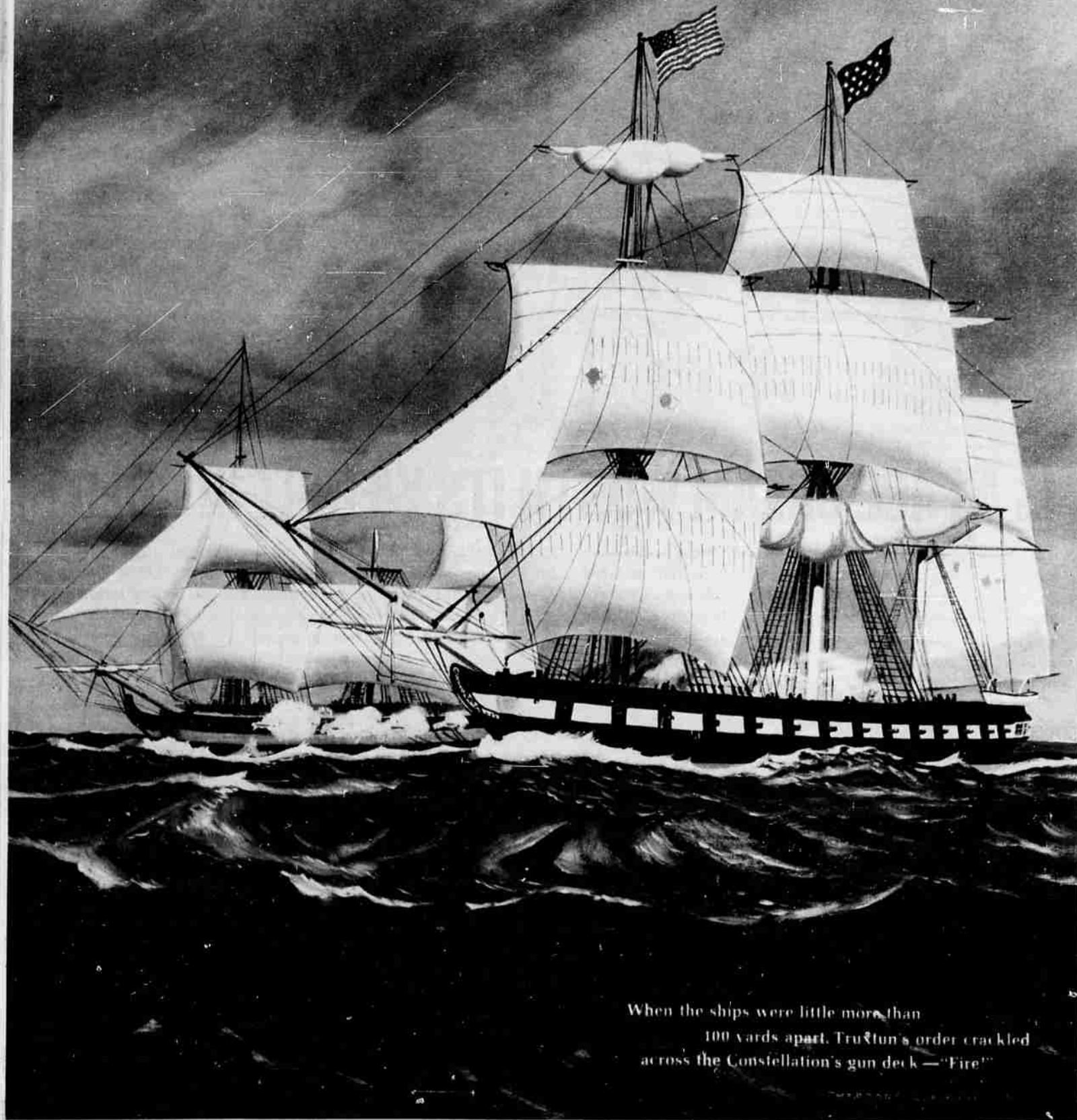


# THE "CONSTELLATION"—The



When the ships were little more than  
100 yards apart, Truxtun's order crackled  
across the Constellation's gun deck—"Fire!"

# Ship America Forgot

This frigate fought some of our  
greatest naval battles, then sank into obscurity; now Americans

are restoring her as another link with our proud past

By ADM. ARTHUR W. RADFORD as told to Alfred Balk



Admiral Arthur W. Radford, now retired, served in three wars during his 45 years of active naval duty and was the Pentagon's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on his retirement in 1957. Born in Chicago, he has been associated with two firms as a consultant and three as a director since his retirement. Admiral Radford lives in Washington, D.C.

EACH YEAR thousands of persons climb aboard the U.S.S. Constitution ("Old Ironsides") in Boston. They pause to admire her cannon, look skyward along her majestic masts, and feel a surge of patriotic pride. Meanwhile, some 400 miles southwest, a sister craft—older than the Constitution and now the Navy's oldest warship—floats in relative obscurity, its stirring history unknown to most of us.

The name of the gallant ship that 162 years ago was winning the U.S. Navy's first great sea victory is the U.S.S. Constellation.

Her commander was Thomas Truxtun, often called "The Father of the U.S. Navy."

How did he and the Constellation come to win one of the first of our Navy's notable triumphs?

After the American Revolution, the few warships we owned had been sold or scrapped. And as inevitably happens when defenses are weak, other powers began humiliating our young nation and exploiting its interests abroad. President George Washington asked for authority to form a navy, and in 1797 three frigates were launched: the United States, the Constellation, and last by six weeks, the Constitution.

Truxtun himself had helped supervise the Constellation's construction. Short, stocky, one of the most respected sailors in the world, he had gone to sea at 12, served briefly in the British navy, captained an American merchant ship during the Revolution, and later formulated navigational, training, and command procedures which were the basis for our navy's greatness.

His ship, 170 feet long, with three masts, square-rigged, and 38 guns, was far from being a giant of the sea. Britain and France had several 100-gun sailing dreadnoughts. But the Constellation was speedy, maneuverable, and solidly built.

On her first cruise, Truxtun molded his 360-man crew into a skilled, fearless fighting team. Late in 1798, orders came to venture into the Caribbean, where dozens of French privateers were intercepting our ships and seizing their cargoes. On Feb. 9, 1799, while cruising just off the small islands southeast of Puerto Rico, Truxtun sighted an unidentified vessel some 15 miles away.

"Hoist all sail!" he commanded. "This may be our opportunity."

The Constellation's speed already had won her the name "Yankee Race Horse." At first she gained little ground in the chase. Then the gap began closing. The mystery ship, Truxtun concluded, was not only a French privateer but speedy and well-armed at that.

"Battle stations!" he commanded from the quarter-deck. Immediately, seamen raced up from the frigate's interior: "topmen" swarmed aloft into the rigging, marines mustered to prepare for sharpshooting duty and possible boarding of the enemy, gunners edged their stubby cannon through open ports.

A fresh wind began whipping up spray. But the Constellation, her sails bulging, pressed the pursuit to within a mile of the other ship, which did turn out to be French.

Then a squall hit. The storm-driven sea shook the Constellation to her innermost beams. Wind made her sails snap like pistol shots. But the ship weathered it.

The French craft, however, responded too late. The sea broke heavily over her wood decks. Then, with a splintering snap, her main topmast crashed down and into the heaving waves.

Truxtun pressed his advantage. Soon the Constellation pulled almost abreast of the enemy. Not a shot had been fired. When the ships were little more than 100 yards apart, Truxtun's order crackled across the Constellation's gun deck:

"Fire!"  
Smoke, flame, and iron balls erupted in a shattering broadside. The French began returning the fire. But the Constellation's gunners were smashing at the enemy frigate's hull while the French cannonades went higher, into the sails and rigging.

For more than an hour, the two ships sent shots crashing toward one another. Then one sail fell from the French ship in tatters, followed by another. Her mizzen topmast was splintered. At least 70 casualties lay on the decks, and her wheel now was unattended.

At 4:30 her captain made his decision.  
"Strike the colors!" he ordered. "The Americans have won!"

THOMAS TRUXTUN learned only later the true dimensions of his victory. Not only had he and his crew outmaneuvered seamen of a power that ranked alongside Britain in that day, but they had captured what was considered the fastest and one of the most feared ships in the world, the formidable, 40-gun *L'Insurgente*.

Three weeks elapsed before courier ships carried the news to the United States. For days, it overshadowed all other topics in every community.

In Boston, citizens celebrated for an entire day. A special play and song were introduced in Philadelphia. Congress created a special gold medal for hero Truxtun.

American trade again began to thrive, ship insurance rates were reduced to reasonable levels, the French government and others began to receive U.S. diplomats with new respect.

This, however, was only the first chapter of the Constellation epic. She went on to capture other privateer ships, fought heroically in the War of 1812, and sailed around the world to help inaugurate the "Open-Door" policy in China.

More than a half-century after her launching, she was capturing illegal slave-trade ships off Africa. During the Civil War, she was on blockade duty in two hemispheres—and today is the only sea survivor of action in that war.

HUNDREDS OF OUR most distinguished naval officers, including Admirals William Leahy and Ernest J. King, underwent part of their training aboard this grand old ship. In World War II, because President Franklin D. Roosevelt remembered her so fondly, the Constellation was recommissioned as auxiliary flagship of Admiral King's Atlantic Fleet. She has taken part in famine relief in Ireland, four world fairs, the centennial celebration of the writing of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and in many other historical events.

Five years ago, it appeared that her last battle had begun—the battle for survival—and that it might be lost. Still sound of beam but without masts and critically in need of repair, she lay neglected in Boston alongside her handsomely restored sister ship, the Constitution. But citizens of Baltimore, where she was built, towed her home.

Now, the nonprofit Star-Spangled Banner Flag House, Inc., already with some funds in hand, hopes to raise \$200,000 needed for her restoration. Admiral Nimitz, in retirement in California, is honorary chairman. To everyone contributing \$1 or more, the sponsors are offering medals made of copper from the Constellation's original spikes, and a lifetime boarding pass. (The address: "Constellation," Dept. FW, Baltimore 2, Md.)

The Constellation may even become flagship of the 1961-1965 Civil War Centennial, a floating museum of all U.S. history to date. It would be sent to Atlantic Coast and possibly Mississippi River ports before permanent berthing alongside Fort McHenry in Baltimore, home of "The Star-Spangled Banner"—for whose constellation of stars she was named.

To those of us who have devoted our lives to naval service, nothing would seem more fitting. Decades from now, youngsters may climb aboard our oldest ship, feel her planking, explore her decks, and say:

"Here was courage and dedication when our nation needed it most. May we all be worthy of the freedom the Constellation so gallantly helped to preserve and extend."