



Soldiers Saved Old Ironsides

Union Troops Helped Sail Fabled Ship to Safety

By Brig. Gen. Paul "Greg" Smith

Massachusetts Army National Guard retired

Cannons thundered as they opened fire in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 12, 1861. The echoes of the Civil War's first salvo reverberated 500 miles away, where the USS Constitution rolled on its anchor chains in the harbor of Annapolis, Maryland. The border state of Maryland seethed with tension between citizens who were loyal to the Union and those determined to join the newly formed Confederacy. No one was certain which direction the "Old Line State" would take.

Across the inflamed country, men and a few women raced to enlist in the forces that would do battle for the soul of the nation. Nowhere was this truer than in the farmlands, seacoast villages and industrial cities of New England.

When President Abraham Lincoln issued his call for troops to defend Washington, D.C., the militia companies of Massachusetts mustered

enthusiastically to join the U.S. Army. But Massachusetts Gov. John Andrew had no funds to move large numbers of soldiers to the nation's capital. Benjamin Butler—lawyer, industrialist and militia brigadier general—used his cunning and clout to convince Bay State bankers to float bonds that would raise needed funds to transport troops by rail to Washington. But there was one condition. The bankers insisted that the militarily inexperienced Butler be given command of the first contingent from Massachusetts.

Answering the Call

Although there were many officers with more experience, Butler assumed command of the first wave of Bay State troops to answer Lincoln's call: the 3rd, 4th, 6th and 8th Regiments of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia. The 6th Regiment was the first to depart from Boston with great fanfare on the evening of April 17, 1861, determined to travel directly to Washington by

the fastest rail route. The route took them through Baltimore, where the troops were required to disembark at one station and march about 10 blocks to another station on the rail line to Washington.

An angry throng of Southern sympathizers and Baltimore street thugs blocked the roads between the two rail stations. Tempers soon flared and the mob attacked the troops, hurling stones, bricks and other debris. Cpl. Sumner Needham was killed when an iron bar struck him on the head. Pistol shots rang out, troops opened fire on the crowd that had grown to nearly 10,000, and the melee became deadly. By the time the 6th Regiment loaded up on the train for Washington, it had

Above: Southern sympathizers battle members of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia trying to pass through Baltimore in April 1861. **Opposite:** Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler.

ABOVE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS. OPPOSITE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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lost four dead and 36 wounded. The riot also left 12 civilians dead, while countless others were injured.

Butler had just arrived in Philadelphia with the 8th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, when he heard the news of the bloody confrontation. Rather than attempt to fight his way through the turbulence and carnage of Baltimore, Butler wisely decided to reroute the 8th Regiment around the city.

Trouble Brewing

Butler's force traveled by train to the rail junction at Perryville, Maryland, then marched to the nearby port of Havre de Grace. Butler then commandeered the rail car ferry boat Maryland, which would carry troops to Annapolis. His plan was to disembark at Annapolis, then travel overland aboard rail cars to Washington.

As Butler and his troops were making their way south, there was trouble brewing in Annapolis. Rumors of plots, conspiracies and marauding Confederate raiders abounded as the superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, Capt. George Blake, pondered his next move.

In addition to safeguarding the midshipmen of the Naval Academy, Blake understood the importance of keeping the USS Constitution out of Confederate hands. The famous warship, nicknamed "Old Ironsides" for her stout oak sheathing that seemed to repel cannonballs, had long since shed her fighting trim. Once the scourge of Barbary pirates and the fearsome predator of British opponents during the War of 1812, the aging vessel now served as a floating barracks and training ship. Regardless of her neglected condition, the capture of Old Ironsides would be a powerful symbolic victory for the new Confederacy.

Blake considered sailing the Constitution out of Annapolis to safer waters, but the only naval personnel he commanded were the green midshipmen of the Naval Academy and the few faculty members who were still loyal to the Union. The uncertain loyalties of seamen around Annapolis ruled out recruiting experienced mariners to help sail the frigate.



Furthermore, the dilapidated condition of the old warship would require both quick repairs and considerable skilled seamanship to navigate the unpredictable rivers and heaving seas to the north. According to one source, Blake packed Old Ironsides' hold with 60,000 pounds of gunpowder, ready to blow the ship to splinters rather than let it be taken by Confederate forces.

Little did Blake realize that help would soon arrive in Annapolis Harbor from an unlikely source.

Troops Brought Ashore

Although Butler was an unscrupulous politician, a bold opportunist and a thorough scoundrel, he was about to face his finest moment. Upon reaching Annapolis on the ferry Maryland, Butler communicated with Gov. Thomas Hicks on April 21 and notified him of his plan

to bring his troops ashore. In the formal parlance of the day, the governor responded, "I content myself with protesting against this movement, which, in view of the excited condition of the people of this State, I cannot but consider an unwise step on the part of the [U.S.] Government. But I must earnestly urge upon you that there shall be no halt made by troops in this City."

Never one to be easily deterred, Butler landed the 8th Regiment and quickly established a base of operations. Blake greeted Butler soon after his arrival and requested assistance in securing the Constitution. The 8th Regiment had formed a detachment of skilled tradesmen for the purpose of clearing roads and repairing railway lines. These soldiers were from the seafaring towns of Essex County, Massachusetts, and

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were probably experienced in ship-building or at least mending boats. The Essex detachment prepared to board the Constitution and quickly make repairs while the Salem Light Infantry company, under the command of Capt. Arthur Devereux, was detailed to secure the ship. Perhaps best known for the infamous witch trials, Salem, Massachusetts, was also a bustling seaport in the 1860s. It is likely that many soldiers of the Salem Light Infantry were experienced mariners.

Sources differ regarding what happened next. A correspondent in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of May 4, 1861, reported that

Butler "ordered his Massachusetts boys to the work. They went to it with a will, and gaining the frigate's deck after a short, sharp struggle in which no bodily harm was done, for their numbers and determined bearing overawed the Secessionists, they found themselves in undisputed possession, and made immediate preparation to get the ship out of further danger from that quarter."

Daunting Voyage

It is highly unlikely that Union troops were opposed as they boarded. But it is apparent that the tradesmen from the New England coastal communities wasted no time setting to work on Old

Ironsides to ensure that the old warship was seaworthy.

In his correspondence, Butler reported: "A plot to take possession of the United States Ship 'Constitution,' moored at the wharf of the naval academy, by the secessionists was discovered, and Capt. [Arthur Devereux] of Salem was detailed with his company to repair on board."

The voyage to safety would prove daunting. Commanded by U.S. Navy Lt. George Washington Rodgers, and crewed by fledgling midshipmen of the Naval Academy under the watchful eyes of the experienced members of the Salem Light Infantry, the Constitution set sail. With towing assistance from

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the steam-powered Maryland, Old Ironsides cleared Annapolis Harbor. But soon, both vessels were grounded in mud.

News of Confederate plans to seize the immobilized Constitution forced urgent action to free the warship. Many of Old Ironsides' cannons were offloaded onto other vessels to lighten it, and the Maryland was forced to jettison some of the rail cars it was carrying. No sooner was the frigate floating free than a sea squall forced it back into the mud.

Eventually, the Constitution cleared the Chesapeake Bay and sailed into the Atlantic Ocean on April 26. The Union's most fabled warship reached the safety of the New York Navy Yard three days later. The Constitution soon made its way north to take up its station with the relocated Naval Academy in Newport, Rhode Island, for the rest of the Civil War.

'Beast Butler'

After claiming credit for saving the Constitution, Butler marched his brigade to Washington and soon was promoted to major general. There is no doubt that his prudent actions in Annapolis helped save Old Ironsides

from the clutches of the Confederacy, but he had reached the pinnacle of his military career. His corrupt and draconian tenure as military governor of New Orleans earned him the nickname "Beast Butler," and he was recalled by Lincoln in 1862. Butler was later given a field command through political influence, but Lt. Gen. Ulysses Grant relieved him for incompetence after a disastrous attack on Fort Fisher, North Carolina. In a rather unusual order, Grant directed Butler to be stationed at his home in Lowell, Massachusetts, where he could do little further damage to the Union cause.

The soldiers who helped sail the Constitution to safety in New York made their way to Washington and rejoined the 8th Regiment. The regiment would go on to fight in almost every major battle of the Civil War, but its valuable service to rescue Old Ironsides would go largely unnoticed.

Today, the Constitution, the U.S. Navy's oldest commissioned warship, rests at anchor in Boston Harbor. But the legendary frigate occupies its present-day place of honor only because U.S. Army soldiers once rescued Old Ironsides from enemy hands. ★

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Opposite: This sketch depicts Union troops retaking the USS Constitution from secessionists in Annapolis, Maryland, at the start of the Civil War in April 1861. **Above:** A lithograph shows the Constitution at anchor off Fort Adams, Rhode Island, in 1861.

OPPOSITE: FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER, NEW YORK. ABOVE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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