

## This Day in History... September 7, 1797

### *First USS Constellation Launched*

Ordered by a Congressional Act in 1794, the first American ship to be christened the *Constellation* was launched on September 7, 1797. It was the first ship commissioned into the United States Navy; the first put to sea; and the first to fight, defeat, and capture an enemy vessel.

The *Constellation* was designed by naval constructors Joshua Humphreys and Josiah Fox. As the first ship commissioned into the United States Navy and the first put to sea, it received the most esteemed name – *Constellation*, in honor of the ring of white stars against a blue background that was once featured on the American flag.

The *Constellation* was quickly pressed into service the following year, convoying merchantmen before traveling to the West Indies to protect American commerce in the Quasi War against France. The ship first saw battle on February 9, 1799 in the waters near Nevis. There it captured France's fastest ship – the *L'Insurgente* – making it the first US boat to capture an enemy vessel. Over the next few months, the *Constellation* seized two more French privateers. Amazed by its ability to travel 13 knots while sailing under nearly an acre of canvas sails, French sailors nicknamed it the "Yankee Racehorse."

The *Constellation* later traveled to the Mediterranean, participating in the blockade of Tripoli, evacuating Marines and diplomats, and joining in the battle that led to peace in 1805. During the War of 1812, the *Constellation* was blockaded by the British fleet, but it helped protect the fortifications at Craney Island. After that war, the *Constellation* returned to the Mediterranean to once again battle the Barbary powers and helped capture the Algerian frigate *Mashuda*.



*Perry served as second lieutenant aboard the Constellation from May 1804 to July 1805*

Aside from brief periods of repairs, the next several decades were busy for the *Constellation*. It protected American shipping operations in South America and the Mediterranean and helped end pirate and slave operations in the West Indies. The *Constellation* landed shore parties and provided boats for the Seminole uprising. In the early 1840s, it safeguarded American interests during the Opium War and protected Hawaii from becoming a British protectorate. The *Constellation* was essentially retired in 1845, remaining in the naval yard until it was dismantled in 1853. But many of its salvageable materials were used to construct a new ship of the same name.

That ship, US Sloop of War *Constellation*, was launched in 1854 and was one of the last all-sail warships built by the US Navy. After it was commissioned in 1855, the ship served as the flagship of the African Squadron. In this role, the *Constellation* intercepted several ships transporting Africans for the slave trade, then released the captives.

On April 19, 1861, a week after the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln declared a blockade on Southern ports. A month later, the *Constellation* seized the brig *Triton* in one of the US Navy's first captures of the Civil War. After returning home briefly that summer, the *Constellation* was sent back to the Mediterranean to guard Union merchant ships from Confederate cruisers. The ship remained there for two years, patrolling and helping with the blockade.

When the war was over, the ship came back to America and served as a Receiving Ship at Norfolk and later as a training vessel during World War I. During that conflict, more than 60,000 World War I recruits trained aboard the *Constellation*.

The 1961 aircraft carrier *Constellation* (known as "Connie" to its crew) was immediately dispatched in response to the North Vietnamese attacks on US ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. It was the first and last US warship to launch strikes against the North Vietnamese. The *Constellation* was also deployed during the Iranian hostage crisis, escorted oil tankers through the Arabian Gulf during the 1987 crisis, and took part in Operation Iraqi Freedom. In 1981, Ronald Reagan presented a presidential flag to the ship and proclaimed the *Constellation* "American's Flagship."



*This stamp honors the second Constellation, built in 1854 with some materials salvaged from the original ship.*

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