

Constitution still sailing

Crosses harbor once a year for 'Salute to the Nation'

BOSTON — "Huzzah! Her sides must be made of iron!"

So shouted an American seaman as British cannon balls bounced harmlessly off the sides of the USS Constitution during her famous victory over the British man-of-war Guerriere in the War of 1812.

"Old Ironsides" wasn't exactly built of iron. But her live oak sides deflected enemy shot remarkably well and she has survived — at least about 10 percent of the original Constitution has survived — 183 years.

The vessel is today a naval oddity for she remains one of the rare tall sailing ships still in commission in anybody's navy.

The Russians use an ancient square-rigger, Krusenstern, as a training ship. But the U.S. Navy assigns an active duty officer, with the rank of commander, and the uniform of 1812 to skipper "Old Ironsides."

He is backed up by an active-duty executive officer and a crew of 49 sailors who have volunteered for the assignment from boot camp.

Cmdr. Robert Gillen of Charlestown, Mass., is Constitution's 59th commander. On a recent summer day, he marched smartly into his office, wearing the swallow-tail jacket of his uniform, white choker, britches, calf-high boots with tassels. On his head, he sported a gold-trimmed "fore-an-aft" hat.

"How many at muster this morning?" he asks, all business.

"Thirty-nine," replies the executive officer.

"We're undermanned," shrugs the skipper, philosophically. "And that's not unusual for most U.S. ships today."

Gillen and his men are required to wear the ancient garb on special occasions. Cost to the Navy for the skipper's custom-tailored uniform which cannot be handed down to his successor is about \$600.

It takes Gillen a full 45 minutes to squeeze into the togs. When he does, he prefers not to sit down.

Gillen wears two other more mundane "hats." He serves as the Navy's senior representative in Boston, once a busy naval center but much reduced in importance since the Nixon administration.

Gillen is also the officer in charge of navy support activities in the area.

"Some of my Russian friends find it hard to understand what I'm doing now," quips Gillen.

The Constitution, he explains, is more than just a relic.

The Navy spends about \$80,000 a year for maintaining Constitution which needs constant caulking, painting, polishing and shining. "She's evidence of the obvious commitment the country has to preserving the freedom of the seas," says Gillen, leaning against a picture window which looks up at the ship's bowsprit and dolphin striker.

"But it's more than that. She's symbolic of our maritime history, of our national heritage."

Constitution was the second ship built for America's Navy after the American Revolution.

Designed by Joshua Humphreys and Josiah Fox, she was a technological marvel in her day because she incorporated a number of important new features in naval architecture.

Her bow was shaped more sharply than other ships of the time. Her masts were taller. She carried more sail — more than an acre's worth.

Her sides were made of 21 inches of live oak, one of the toughest kinds of wood available. And she mounted 24-pound guns.

This combination allowed her to outlast her enemies while pounding them to death when engaged in battle.

A gold-framed mirror seized from the Guerriere still hangs in the commodore's aft cabin and the original desk used by first skipper Charles Stewart is sound and equipped with quill pens.

Gillen and his crew put to sea once a year much like other crews. Their cruise is dramatic if abbreviated.

On July 4 Constitution is tugged across Boston Harbor where she fires a 21-gun "Salute to the Nation."

The salute celebrates the vitality of American democracy — a thought which is enshrined in the vessel's name.

But there is an important technical reason for the trip: To turn the ship around so she weathers evenly on both sides.

Preserving Constitution has inspired many over the years.

The nation's school children chipped in their nickels and dimes in the 1930s, inspiring Congress to come through with matching monies to make a major rebuild possible.

A&M-developed sorghum

Guatemalan farms boosted

By USCHI MICHEL-HOWELL
Battalion Staff

A disease and insect resistant strain of grain sorghum developed at Texas A&M University has helped small subsistence farmers and large commercial producers in Guatemala to increase their production by at least 25 percent.

Until the project started, Guatemalans had grown a sorghum variety that took 11 months to mature and was of low yield, Bill Ross, assistant director for international programs, said.

The white grain sorghum is called ICTAM 777 and ICTAM 950. Developed by Dr. Fred Miller, plant scientist at Texas A&M, genes allow it to ripen in about 90 days.

The Guatemala project is one of several international assistance programs to foreign countries at Texas A&M and was completed last September. Costing \$1,790,490, it was funded by the United States Agency for International Development.

The ICTAM sorghum varieties yield about three crops a year and are adapted to a small-plot economy that uses almost no machinery, Bill Ross said.

"An advantage of the Guatemala project is that it produced a commercial variety of grain sorghum that is also ideal for Texas growers," Ross said.

The Office of International Programs is concerned with helping other countries improve, but also wants Texas farmers to benefit from the various projects, Ross said.

Sorghum is important for Guatemalans, because it is used for tortillas, which besides black beans and maize, are the main staples of Guatemalan diet. Baby food, grits or cereal are also made from sorghum, Miller said.

Small farmers consume their sorghum completely on the farm, and Guatemalan commercial production is mostly for the home market, Ross said.

Sorghum is drought resistant, be-

cause it rolls its leaves up when the weather is dry and prevents moisture from evaporating, Miller said.

"The Guatemalan sorghum is not more drought resistant, but it has an increased yield, because we added certain genes," Miller said. "The plant has longer panicles and more seeds," he said.

The new varieties can be used for human food, Miller said, because they taste similar to maize. In the United States sorghum is presently used only as livestock feed, but Africans and Indians consume it daily, Miller said.

Guatemalans practice intercropping, a method where other crops besides sorghum are grown in the same field, Ross said. When the sorghum yield is increased, the other crops also increase in productivity, because they also can be planted more frequently, Miller said.

The assistance project involved

training of Guatemalans at Texas A&M as well as the sending of short-term consultants to the South American country.

"The biggest problem that faced us there was political instability," Ross said. Consultants were at times in danger of being killed or kidnapped, due to constant fighting between rival factions, he said. But no incidents were reported.

The farmers in Guatemala, most of whom live along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, have responded well to the new sorghum variety, Ross said.

Texas A&M-sponsored radio commercials promoted buying sorghum seeds. "We sold the seeds in 10-cent packages, at the same price you can get a Coke over there," Ross said. "In the commercials we stressed that the farmer who buys seeds with his 10 cents is a smart one, while the one who buys a Coke isn't."

Orchestra plays tonight

The Bryan-College Station Chamber Orchestra will open its 1980-81 season with a concert tonight at 8 p.m. in Rudder Theater. Presenting the concert is the Classical Piano Group at Texas A&M University.

Featured soloist will be Carl Fischer, a nine-year-old pianist from Dallas who began his piano studies with Lyn Reyna of Bryan while his father was attending Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine. Carl is currently a student of Dr. Richard Rodriguez of the University of Texas at Dallas. Carl is the son of Roger and Lucia Fischer of Dallas.

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