



Boarding & War of 1812 Boarding Caps

“Shall I Board Her!” – LT William S. Bush, USMC¹

“BOARDERS, sailors appointed to make an attack, by boarding, or to repel such attempt by the enemy.”²

“BOARDING A Ship, an assault made by one ship upon another, by entering her, in time of battle, with a detachment of armed men...”³

Boarding, as a tactic of warfare, was more commonly undertaken by privateers than naval vessels. The outcomes of navy ship-to-ship engagements were generally determined by the superior gunnery skills of one ship’s crew over another. Nonetheless, the US Navy trained its crews in the act of boarding and repelling boarders. On August 23, 1800, Captain Thomas Truxtun issued the following:

“Order for Boarding, U.S. Frigate President, Captain Thomas Truxtun, U. S. Navy, commanding.

The first Lieutenant to lead the men stationed at N^o 3. 7. 11. 15. 19. 23. & 27 and Opposite on the gun deck, as soon as the order for boarding is called up by my Direction (or in the case of my death, by the Commanding Officer in succession) they are to arm themselves for that purpose, with pistols cutlasses or Boarding Axes – to hasten on Deck & steadily conform to my orders, or the Commanding Officer in my absence, and to rush on board the Enemy when Directed, laying with the greatest fury all prostrate Untill the Enemy cry aloud for

¹ LT John Contee, USMC to LCol. Franklin Wharton, USMC, August 31, 1812 recounting the death of LT Bush while attempting to board HMS *Guerriere*, August 12, 1812. As quoted in, *The Naval War of 1812, A Documentary History*, Volume 1. William Dudley, ed. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 246.

² William Burney, ed., *Falconer’s New Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1815 edition). (London: Chatham Publishing, 2006), 46.

³ *Ibid.*

Quarter and surrender their ship &c they are then to be as kind and Merciful as they were before furious[.]

The like Conduct is to be observed by the men stationed on the Forecastle waist afterguard & upperdeck cannon headed by the 4th 5th and 6th Lieutenants[.]

The topmen are to fire on the Enemy with the greatest briskness, as soon as the ships are Grappled, or near enough to each other to effect Complete execution, taking good aim each fire, but to be carefull and not injure our own men, when they have boarded or in the act of boarding[.]

The Marine Officers with the marines are to cover the boarders and the second and third Lieutenants on the gun deck are to continue a constant Fire into the Enemy or to be ready to sustain a new Action (should the ships be ungrappled or get asunder with the Cannon to viz N^o 1. 5. 9. 13. 17. 21. 25. 29 – the Boatswain and his mates forehead, the Master & his mates aft with the men to attend them as named below, are to Grapple & lash fast the Enemy as I may Direct &c ...”⁴

Capt. Truxtun’s orders for boarding are quite detailed and likely his crew practiced boarding tactics on a regular basis

During the August 19, 1812, battle between USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere*, Captain Isaac Hull of *Constitution* called for his boarders when the two ships locked together. According to the logbook of *Constitution*:

“...having [a?] Bowsprit entangled in our mizen Rigging/our Marines during that time keeping up a very brisk and gauling fire on him, from the/Taffrail, and our Boarders preparing to board, at which time Lieutenant Charles Morris, and/Lieutenant William S. Bush of the Marines fell from off the Taffrail, the former severely/wounded, and the latter killed...”⁵

Just as Lieutenants Bush and Morris were felled, *Constitution* and *Guerriere* separated, and Capt. Hull abandoned the boarding plan.

⁴ “Order of Boarding, U.S. Frigate *President*, Captain Thomas Truxtun, U.S. Navy, commanding, [23 August 1800]. As quoted in, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938), 278-279.

⁵ “Remarks on Thursday[,] August 20th 1812” [actually, remarks from 12noon August 19th – a ‘day’ began at 12noon at sea, so the battle, which began with the 2pm sighting, was technically on Aug. 20th, but really August 19th according to time and date-keeping on land], from *The United States Ship Constitution*, logbook. National Archives Microfilm Publications, M1030, “Logbooks and Journals of the U.S.S. *Constitution*, 1798-1934, Roll 1, Volume 3, Feb. 1-Dec. 13, 1812.

Boarders were assigned equipment for the anticipated hand-to-hand combat. The most common weapons included: pistols, cutlasses, Boarding Axes (which were also used to cut away damaged rigging and broken spars), pikes, and Boarding Caps (helmets). Of all the weaponry assigned, it was the unusual US Navy boarding cap that was often noted by Royal Navy sailors and officers.

From remarks made in *Constitution's* logbook in the summer of 1812, it appears that boarding caps were made aboard the ship itself – note that both the sail makers and armorers were involved in the construction of the caps of stiff leather which were stitched together and then reinforced with protective iron strapping. *Constitution's* logbook on August 5th and 6th, 1812: “...Carpenters employed repairing the Taffrail, Sail Makers, and armourers fitting of Caps and Guards for the Boarders...” and, “...employed cleaning small arms and fitting Caps for the Boarders...”⁶

It could also be that more caps were needed aboard *Constitution* and therefore had to be made while the ship was at sea. Regardless of whether the caps were made on shore or on board, the US Navy boarding cap appears to be unique to the American service. According to William Gilkerson, “Apparently [boarding caps] were a distinct American innovation, for no evidence has been found to suggest their use at all in any European navy, and those few that may have found their way aboard British warships must have done so by private purchase, for there are no records of any issue in the Royal Navy.”⁷

In 1813, Samuel Leech, a crewmember of HMS *Macedonian*, entered the US Navy after arriving in Boston. He signed aboard the US brig *Siren* and provided a description of the vessel which included the US Navy boarding caps:

*“Our crew was composed of some one hundred and twenty-five smart, active men. We were all supplied with stout leather caps, something like those used by firemen. These were crossed by two strips of iron, covered with bearskin, and were designed to defend the head, in boarding an enemy’s ship, from the stroke of the cutlass. Strips of bearskin were likewise used to fasten them on, serving the purpose of false whiskers, and causing us to look as fierce as hungry wolves.”*⁸

⁶ *Constitution* Logbook., August 5 and 6, 1812.

⁷ William Gilkerson, *Boarders Away, With Steel – Edged Weapons & Polearms*. (Lincoln, RI: Andrew Mowbray, Inc., 1991), 104. Gilkerson cites an image of “Nelson Boarding the ‘San Nicolas’ in the Victory off Cape St. Vincent...14th February 1797...” [Object ID: PAH7917] in the collections of the National Maritime Museum, UK as depicting a few men who may be wearing protective headgear and not just hats or uniform covers; <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/147864.html>. Accessed April 26, 2012.

⁸ [Samuel Leech], *A Voice from the Main Deck, Being a Record of the Thirty Years’ Adventures of Samuel Leech*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 118-119.

The British historian, William James, also noted the American boarding caps when describing the battle between *Constitution* and HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant*:

*“On the morning of the action, the Constitution victualled, in crew..., 469 men, and 3 boys...Her men were provided with leather caps, for boarding; fitted with narrow plates of iron, crossing at the top, and bending upward from the lower edge of the cap, to prevent a blow from striking the shoulder, after having glanced on the head.”*⁹

In 1816, after the close of the War of 1812, Royal Navy Captain Joshua Rowley Watson traveled through the United States. On July 11th, Capt. Watson and friends visited the Philadelphia Navy Yard. There he made several observations, comparing Royal Naval vessels to the American navy ships in the Yard. He also noted boarding caps:

*“Their boarding pikes are better than those in use in our Navy, and they have provided their Boarders with a leather Cap guarded with Iron, which I think clever.”*¹⁰

In 1824, another Royal Navy officer, John Cunningham, visited Commodore Isaac Hull and his wife aboard USS *United States* when Cunningham’s ship, *Cambridge* and *United States* were both in Peru. Cunningham provided a fairly lengthy description of *United States* and also noted the crew’s boarding caps:

*“The States is a tremendous frigate...Their fighting arrangements are admirable; and, having seen them at quarters, I could not help admiring several of their appointments. One especially – their boarding cap. It is of helmet form, the frame of pretty stout iron, covered outside with a stout, hard leather. Unless a cutlass were laid on by a very heavy arm, the head would scarcely be wounded. They are decidedly the best preservative I ever say before in any service...”*¹¹

Few 19th century boarding caps are found today in museum collections, and yet Gilkerson contends that they were made “in some significant quantity in order to equip all the ships of the fledgling U.S. Navy.”¹² *Marshall’s Practical Marine Gunnery* of 1822 lists the following under “Outfits” (i.e. how many of

⁹ William James, *Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812*. (London: Conway Maritime Press, 2004), 232.

¹⁰ Kathleen A. Foster, *Captain Watson’s Travels in America: The Sketchbooks and Diary of Joshua Rowley Watson, 1772-1818*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 300. Accompanying the diary note on the boarding caps is a sketch of a cap; it is very similar to the reproduction boarding cap in the photograph on page 6.

¹¹ L.G. Carr Laughton, “John Cunningham’s Journal.” (*The Mariner’s Mirror*, Vol. IX, No. 11, November, 1923), 335.

¹² Gilkerson, 106.

each piece of equipment per gun or guns): “Boarding Caps, 3 to every gun.”¹³ A vessel the size of *Constitution*, therefore, would have carried approximately 150 boarding caps, based upon Marshall’s apportionment.

Gilkerson also cites an ordnance list which includes boarding caps. “...Gunner Quinn’s 1837 ordnance list¹⁴ not[es] allowances for all classes of vessels. The allowance of ‘boarding caps’ for a frigate of the 1st class (50 to 60 guns and 400 to 500 men) is 200...”¹⁵

In the late 1990s, the Naval Historical Center Detachment Boston (currently the Naval History & Heritage Command Detachment Boston) reproduced three different varieties of boarding caps based upon an extant 19th century boarding cap and contemporary written descriptions. Photographs of the reproduction boarding caps follow:



Reproduction boarding cap made by the Naval Historical Center Detachment Boston, from a possible naval boarding cap, 1800-1815, collection of Commodore John Rodgers, Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, Baltimore, Maryland; leather, canvas, iron.

¹³ George Marshall, *Marshall’s Practical Marine Gunnery; Containing a View of the Magnitude, Weight, Description & Use, of Every Article Used in the Gunner’s Department in the Navy of the United States*. (Norfolk, VA: C. Hall, 1822), 17.

¹⁴ Gilkerson notes that Gunner Richard Quinn’s “Outfits Sea and Armore Stores in the Gunners Department in the U. S. Navey” is a manuscript in the Norman Flayderman Collection. See note 56, 148 and the bibliography, 151.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.



Reproduction boarding cap made by the Naval Historical Center Detachment Boston, based upon 19th descriptions and an illustration in William Gilkerson's Boarders Away with Steel - Edged Weapons and Polearms. See similar boarding cap sketched by Captain Joshua Rowley Watson, 1816, in Captain Watson's Travels in America; stiff leather, iron.



Reproduction boarding cap with fur made by the Naval Historical Center Detachment Boston, based partly upon the description provided by Samuel Leech in [A Voice from the Main Deck](#); stiff leather, faux fur, iron.

***Naval History & Heritage Command Detachment Boston
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