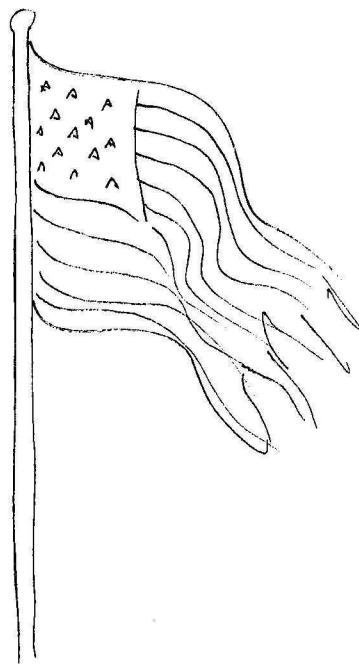


"GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS"

**A skit about Fort McHenry
and the story behind our national anthem**



An original skit by Ellen J. McHenry

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GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

a play about Fort McHenry

written by Ellen J. McHenry

Characters:

- Major Armistead, the American commanding officer at Fort McHenry
- Lt. Smith, Major Armistead's assistant (a fictional character)
- the narrator

Props:

- a large version of the map shown at the end of this skit
- a pointer stick for the men to use when pointing to sites on the map
- a large version of the flag shown at the end of this skit (paper flag is fine)
- several dozen cannon balls made out of crumpled up sheets of newspaper
- shako hats for the actors, if possible (see instructions at the back)

"Stage set up:

This is one possibility for set up, but you can adapt it to whatever suits your situation:



Tips for the actors:

- 1) Say your lines slowly! Remember that the audience has never heard this before. Practice listening to each other reading your lines and try to hear it as the audience will hear it.
- 2) Speak loudly.
- 3) Pause each time the audience is supposed to respond. The narrator can cue the audience by starting the cheers and boos at the appropriate moments.
- 4) Say the lines in a natural way, the way you would say them if you really meant them.
- 5) If you decide to do the play without memorizing the lines, try to look at your audience as much as possible even when you are reading the lines.
- 6) Practice saying the lines in different ways and have someone pick which way sounds the best.

THE PLAY:

Narrator: This play takes place on September 13th and 14th in the year 1814. The scene is Fort McHenry in Baltimore. The American and British troops are engaged in the War of 1812. This war is about American independence. Britain will not recognize American independence even though the War of Independence is several decades in the past. The British believe that the American victory in that war was simply a matter of good luck, not matter of superior forces. Britain is in no mood to recognize America as an equal and an ally. Britain rules the seas and if they want to stop all American trading, they have a right to do so. Amazingly enough, the Americans don't agree with this policy. The Americans have been so bold as to provoke a war with England to solve this difference of opinion.

So far, the war of 1812 has not been a great success for the Americans. The British have already captured Washington, and if they capture Baltimore, as well, the Americans will have no choice but to surrender.

We now take you to the scene inside Fort McHenry in Baltimore. You, the audience, will play the part of the American soldiers inside the fort. This is Major Armistead, your commanding officer.

Let's show some enthusiasm for our work here today. If you hear good news, cheer! If you hear bad news, boo.

Armistead: Good morning, troops! I hope you all had a good breakfast this morning. Lt. Smith and I have some good news and some bad news for you today. The good news is that our American land troops have stopped the British soldiers from taking over Baltimore!

Audience cheers

Smith: The bad news is that they've already taken over our capitol city, Washington, and burned down all the government buildings, including the White House!

Audience boos.

Armistead: The goods news is that we have a beautiful new flag flying over our fort today! *(Pause for audience to cheer)* It is one of the largest flags ever made. It was sewed for us by a kindly widow named Mary Pickersgill. She specializes in making extra large flags. Isn't it lovely? *(Pause for audience to react, go right on if they don't.)*

Smith: The bad news is that, at this very moment, there are forty British ships off our coast, and their only mission is to have this big flag down by tomorrow morning and have their flag flying instead!

Audience boos.

Armistead: The good news is that the builders of this fort reassure us that this fort can withstand quite a bombardment from naval attack.

Audience cheers.

Smith: The bad news is that we are going to find out today whether that is true or not! The British are about to launch more fire power on us than has ever been leveled at the United States in one place!

Audience boos.

Armistead: The good news is that we have 18 cannons in our fort that can hit targets at a distance of over a mile away!

Audience cheers.

Smith: The bad news is that the British have 90 cannons.... on each ship! *(Pause for audience to boo)* And those cannons can shoot targets at a distance of over two miles away! Their four ships are called: the Terror, the Meteor, the Volcano, and the Devastation!

Audience boos.

Armistead: The good news is that they only have one ship that is capable of firing their rockets at us.

Audience cheers.

Smith: The bad news is that those rockets that it fires are deadly! *(Pause for audience to boo)* They are called Congreve rockets. These rockets are packed full of huge, sharp pieces of metal. The rockets are shot into the air, and just as they are coming down on their target, they explode, and their deadly packet of metal pieces bursts onto the heads of their enemies!

Audience boos.

Armistead: The good news is that we came up with a brilliant plan of how to stop the British ships from entering Baltimore harbor. *(Pause for audience*

to cheer) We sunk a bunch of old ships all along the entrance to the harbor. Their masts are sticking up like a picket fence. The British could never sail through them. Besides, we've also got several ships with cannons behind that line of sunken ships.

Smith: The bad news is..... I hear cannons!! I think the British are starting to fire upon us! There is nothing we can do folks! We just have to sit here and get bombarded. Good luck everyone! God protect you! [By the way, if you catch a cannon ball, hold on to it tight! You will need it in a few minutes!] *(You must add this direction to the audience, because kids will automatically start throwing them back. They need to hold on to them so they will have cannon balls with which to attack the British.)*

Actors disappear out of view to where the cannons balls are hidden and begin lobbing cannon balls into the audience. The bombing eventually stops and the actors return to the stage.

Armistead: I know it's midnight, troops, but there is work to be done. Our lookout has spotted several British ships trying to sneak down the bay to the East of us. *(Point out direction audience should throw cannon balls.)* They should be in our firing range by now. Let 'em have it!!

Audience should now lob the paper cannon balls in the direction Armistead has indicated.

Smith: Major Armistead, sir, we have a report from the lookout. He says that the British fleet appears to be turning around and sailing away! I think the attack on Fort McHenry is over!!

Audience should cheer.

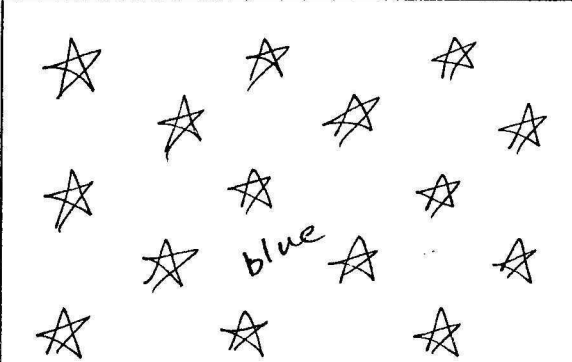
Narrator: And so it was. The attack on Fort McHenry ended on September 14th, 1814. The British gave up their attempt to take Baltimore. But there is one more part to this story. There was one ship back behind the British was ships that was on a mission of peace. On this boat were two Americans who had come on board to negotiate the release of an American doctor who was a British prisoner of war. One of the American men who had come on board was named Francis Scott Key. He watched the battle from that British ship. Whenever one of the Congreve rockets would burst and light up the sky with a reddish glow, Francis could catch a glimpse of the flag that Mary Pickersgill made, still flying over Fort McHenry. Francis watched the battle all through the night and desperately hoped that the flag would still be flying in the morning.

Francis wrote a poem as he watched the battle. Here is the first verse of the poem he wrote:

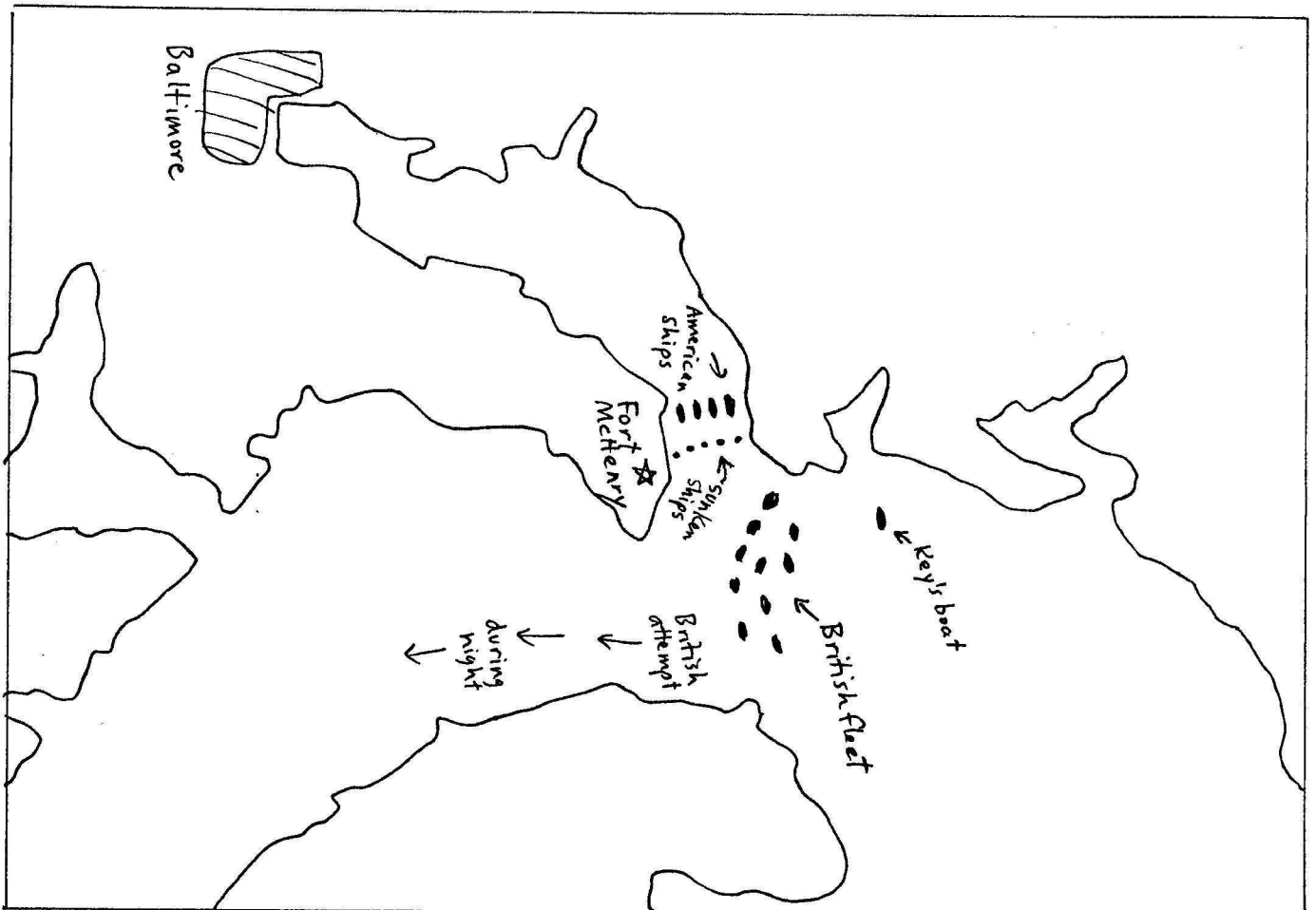
Oh say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed, at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night, that our flag was still there!
Oh say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave,
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave?

Performance option: You may want the narrator to begin singing the verse, instead of reading it. The narrator can signal to the audience to join in the singing.

stars are white

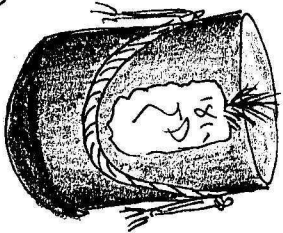
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Map of Baltimore area

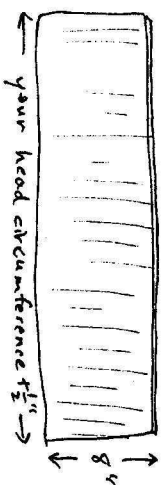


HOW TO MAKE SHAKO HAT:

You will need: (corrugated) cardboard, duct-tape, black acrylic paint, light grey or tan yarn, 2 paper fasteners, glue, black fabric, putty paint, piece of cereal box cardboard or poster-board, silver spray paint, (or acrylic silver paint), a feather

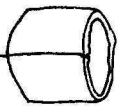


- 1 Cut a piece of corrugated cardboard 8" high and as long as the measurement around your head plus 1/2"



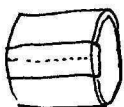
- 2 Gently bend the cardboard making lots of little creases so it will go into a round shape.

3



Roll into tube shape with ends flush, not overlapping.

4



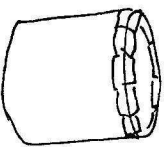
Secure with duct-tape

5



Place on another piece of cardboard and trace around circle shape.

- 6 Cut out circle shape and ~~glue~~ tape onto cylinder with duct-tape



- 7 Cut-out this shape from either a very large piece of cereal box, or a piece of poster-board:



- 7 1/2 Tape brim onto hat with duct-tape



- 8 Paint brim () with black acrylic paint.
- 9 Cover hat with black fabric or felt (or just paint it black)
- 10 Trace pattern below onto cereal box or poster-board.
Go over design with putty paint. Let dry. Paint silver.
(You can just cut this pattern out and glue onto cardboard, instead of tracing)

