THE ROCKET'S RED GLARE
The incredible story of “The Star-Spangled Banner”

BY JUSTIN O’NEILL | ART BY GARY HANNA

CHARACTERS

Circle the character you will play.
*Starred characters are major roles.

Major George Armistead, commander of Fort McHenry
Mary Young Pickersgill, flagmaker
Rebecca Young, Pickersgill’s mother

Caroline, Pickersgill’s teenage daughter
*Francis Scott Key, lawyer
*John Stuart Skinner, agent for the American military
Admiral Cochrane, British officer

General Robert Ross, British officer
British Soldier
*Dr. William Beanes, elderly doctor
*Historians 1, 2, 3 (H1, H2, H3)
*Narrators 1, 2, 3 (N1, N2, N3)
**PROLOGUE**

**The Road to 1812**

H1: Have you ever heard of the War of 1812?

H2: Probably not. It is a forgotten war—a minor conflict, no more than a blip in history.

H3: But to those who lived through it, the War of 1812 was anything but minor.

H1: It was brutal.

H2: It was bloody.

H3: And if the United States had lost, America might not even exist today.

H1: Thirty years after the U.S. gained independence from Great Britain, tensions between the two countries remained high.

H2: At sea, the British were harassing American ships and seizing their crews.

H3: Meanwhile, the British were at war with France.

H1: It was a big mess.

H2: In 1812, U.S. President James Madison reluctantly asked Congress to declare war on Britain.

H3: But did the U.S. really stand a chance against the most powerful nation in the world?

**SCENE 1**

**Baltimore, Maryland, Summer 1813**

N1: One afternoon, Mary Young Pickersgill answers a knock on her door.

**ARMISTEAD:** Good morning, Mrs. Pickersgill. I am Major George Armistead, commander of Fort McHenry.

** PICKERSGILL:** Please come in, Major. This is my mother, Mrs. Rebecca Young, and my daughter, Caroline.

**ARMISTEAD:** How do you do, ladies.

**YOUNG:** Very well, thank you. So how can we help you, Major?

**ARMISTEAD:** We think the British are going to attack Baltimore. We’ve been preparing to defend the city and we’re ready—except for one thing.

**CAROLINE:** You need a flag.

**ARMISTEAD:** Exactly. We need a magnificent American flag to fly above the fort.

**YOUNG:** Well, you’ve certainly come to the right place.

**ARMISTEAD:** I’m told your flags are the finest around.

** PICKERSGILL:** What dimensions did you have in mind?

**ARMISTEAD:** Big. Really big. We need a flag so large that the British will have no difficulty seeing it.

** PICKERSGILL** *(smiling):* We won’t disappoint you.

N2: Over the next six weeks, Pickersgill, her mother, her daughter, and several others get to work sewing.

**SCENE 2**

**Chesapeake Bay**

**Wednesday, September 7, 1814**

N3: Francis Scott Key and John Stuart Skinner are aboard a small ship. Key paces nervously, as Skinner, a U.S. military officer, peers through a spyglass.

N1: The hot sun shimmers on the waves as the boat glides through the bay.

**KEY:** Any sign of the British fleet?

**SKINNER:** We’re displaying the truce flag.

**KEY:** You’re quite sure the British won’t fire on us?

**SKINNER:** Even amid the savagery of war, soldiers must abide by certain rules.

**KEY** *(sitting down again)*: Yes, but who knows what wickedness the British are capable of? They set fire to the Capitol, the Library of Congress, and the President’s house!

**SKINNER** *(turning to Key)*: Even amid the savagery of war, soldiers must abide by certain rules.

**KEY** *(sitting down again)*: I know. It’s just that I’m worried about old Beanes. We must rescue him soon, or I fear he may be lost forever.

**SKINNER:** What we must do is keep our wits about us.

**KEY:** So, you think there is a chance the British will let Dr. Beanes go?

**SKINNER:** Well, no. Not really.

**KEY:** Not really?
SKINNER (exasperated): With luck, we’ll find the British and rescue Dr. Beanes. Is that what you want to hear?
KEY: What I want is to find him. He never should have been taken prisoner in the first place.
SKINNER: Listen. I know President Madison wanted you on this mission. I know Dr. Beanes is your friend. But I didn’t need you to come. I’ve negotiated the release of prisoners of war many times. But what experience do you have? None! You will only get in my way.
KEY: I will not get in your way. (pointing) Look!
SKINNER (turning): The Tonnant! The British ship where Beanes is being held prisoner! (to his crew)
Prepare to pull alongside the Tonnant!

SCENE 3
Aboard the Tonnant

N1: Skinner and Key are brought aboard the enormous British ship. Two officers in stiff military uniforms greet them.
ROSS: To what do we owe this pleasure?
SKINNER: The President sent us to negotiate the release of your captive, Dr. Beanes.
ROSS: I see.
N2: Skinner and Key look around at the grand warship.
N3: It is abuzz with activity. Sailors and soldiers busily load cannons, consult maps, and adjust sails.

KEY (whispering to Skinner): Something’s up.
SKINNER (whispering): Indeed . . .
COCHRANE: I’m afraid you’ve come at an unfortunate time. We are preparing for an attack on—
ROSS: Ahem!
SKINNER: Attack? What attack?
ROSS: Let’s discuss this like gentlemen, shall we?

SCENE 4
Admiral Cochrane’s cabin on the Tonnant

N1: The Americans and the British dine together in Admiral Cochrane’s elegant cabin.
N2: The men eye each other suspiciously over meat stew and crusty bread.
SKINNER: It seems things are quite busy aboard the Tonnant today.
COCHRANE: We are getting ready for—
ROSS: Ahem! More wine, gentlemen? (pouring) Now, let’s get to the reason you are here.
COCHRANE: Yes. Why should we release Dr. Beanes? He attacked British soldiers.
SKINNER: Attacked? Hardly. Those soldiers barged into his house!
COCHRANE: I fail to see your point.
KEY: This whole thing is just a misunderstanding. I know Dr. Beanes well. He’s an old man, beloved in his community, and a good doctor. Does such a man deserve to languish in prison?
COCHRANE: How dare you—
KEY: Did you know he cared for injured British troops when they passed through his town?
SKINNER (handing over papers): Those troops have written letters of support for him.
N3: Ross and Cochrane look over the letters.
ROSS: It seems Dr. Beanes acted charitably toward our men.
COCHRANE: But General, we
mustn’t let him go now. Not right before Baltim—
ROSS: Ahem! Because he treated British soldiers so
kindly, we will treat Dr. Beanes kindly. He is free to go.
KEY: Excellent! (aside, to Skinner) That was easy.

SCENE 5
Below deck on the Tonnant

N1: A soldier leads Key through the ship’s underbelly.
N2: Key holds a handkerchief to his nose to block the
stench of the stuffy air.
BRITISH SOLDIER: Hey, Beanes! Wake up!
N3: Beanes, hunched on a crate, lifts his head.
KEY: Doctor! Are you all right?
BEANES (weakly): Key? Is it really you?
KEY: I’ve come to free you, old friend . . . My goodness,
man! Haven’t they given you a change of clothes?
Decent food?
BEANES: I’ve been treated like a criminal.
KEY: Well, it’s over now.
N1: Key helps Beanes stand up. When they turn
to leave, Cochrane stands in their way.
COCHRANE: I am afraid you cannot leave.
KEY: But General Ross said Dr. Beanes is free.
COCHRANE: Hah! You think I care what happens
to that sad old sack?
KEY: I don’t understand.
COCHRANE: We can’t let you go. You know too much.
KEY: Know too much about what?
COCHRANE: Don’t play dumb. The attack! We can’t let
you bring word of our plans to the Americans. You’ll
just have to wait until after we destroy Baltimore.
KEY: Destroy Baltimore! What?
COCHRANE: Don’t worry. You’ll have an excellent view.

SCENE 6
Six days later, on the American ship

N2: It’s the morning of September 13. The British have
let Key, Skinner, and Beanes return to their small ship.
But they are surrounded by mighty British warships
that will destroy them if they try to go anywhere.
KEY: Look! Cochrane has sailed his attack force toward
the fort. I count 10 warships and a rocket vessel.
N3: Suddenly, they hear a deafening explosion.

SCENE 7
Before dawn on September 14, 1814

N1: Then another.
N2: And another.
N3: They watch in stunned silence as the
British ships launch rockets and cannon bombs
at Fort McHenry.
N1: Each rocket sails through the sky in a giant
arc and then explodes, sending flesh-piercing
fragments hurtling in all directions.
BEANES: They’ll destroy the fort. Then there will be
nothing to stop them from destroying Baltimore.
KEY: Let’s hope the women and children get out.
SKINNER: Fort McHenry is strong and General
Armistead is a brilliant man. The British may not be
able to bring it down.
N2: A British ship gets a little too close to the fort. One of
the fort’s cannons sends a bomb careening into the air.
It hits the ship, tearing a hole through the hull.
SKINNER, KEY, BEANES: Hooray!
N3: Hours pass and the bombardment goes on.

Mary’s flag was 30 feet tall and 42 feet wide and weighed 50 pounds!
BEANES: It is still too dark to see.
KEY: There’s a bit of a breeze. The flag is moving a little. Can you tell?
SKINNER: Not yet . . .
BEANES: Too dim for these old eyes.
N3: They wait. The sun rises higher . . .
KEY: Yes! I can see . . . I can see stars!
SKINNER: Stars?
KEY: On the flag! It’s still there!
SKINNER: Oh! He’s right!
KEY, SKINNER, BEANES: Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!
N1: The men hug and cheer.
N2: Skinner extends his hand to Key.
SKINNER: Well, I must say good job, Key. We did it.
KEY (shaking Skinner’s hand): Yes, we did.
BEANES (shouting to the Tonnant): So long, Cochrane! Go back to Britain, you fool!
KEY: I need a pen.
SKINNER: What’s wrong?
KEY: Nothing—I just . . . I want to write something down.
N3: The only paper Key can find is a used envelope.
KEY (writing): “O say can you see . . .”

EPiLOGUE
The Voices of History

COCHRANE: The sight of the flag over Fort McHenry convinced me we could not win. I ordered a withdrawal.
SKINNER: After that, Cochrane let us go.
ARMISTEAD: And the war finally came to an end in the winter of 1815.
PICKERSGILL: Today, the flag I stitched by hand—
CAROLINE: With my help!
PICKERSGILL: —is on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.
KEY: The words I scrawled on the back of the envelope that morning 200 years ago became a poem, which I called “Defence of Fort M’Henry.” It was published in a pamphlet and set to the tune of a popular song.
YOUNG: It caught on quickly—soon the whole city of Baltimore was singing it!
CAROLINE: Then the rest of the country was too. The song was renamed “The Star-Spangled Banner.”
KEY: And in 1931, it became the national anthem of the United States.
Why Do We Sing the National Anthem at Games?
Scope investigates  By Jennifer Dignan

The air inside TD Garden, home of the Boston Bruins hockey team, was heavy with emotion. It was April 17, 2013, just two days after terrorists’ bombs had killed three people and injured more than 250 others near the finish line of the Boston Marathon.

Singer Rene Rancourt lifted his microphone to perform “The Star-Spangled Banner.” But halfway through the second line, he lowered it—allowing his voice to blend with the thousands of others that had joined in from the stands. Many people sang with tears streaming down their faces; others wrapped an arm around a loved one. That night, our national anthem seemed to hold a special meaning for the people of Boston. It gave them a way to express their love for their city and their country; a way to say, “We will get through this together.”

After the stirring sing-along ended, the crowd broke first into cheers, then into a fervent chant of “USA! USA!”

Something extraordinary happened that evening. And it echoed a moment from history—a moment which, 95 years earlier, started the whole tradition of singing the anthem at sporting events.

It happened in September 1918, during the first game of the World Series. The fans who had turned up to watch the Chicago Cubs play the Boston Red Sox had been sitting in near-silence throughout the game. The U.S. was in the midst of World War I, and people had a lot on their minds.

But the crowd’s silence was about to break. During the seventh inning, a military band began to play “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Hearing its first strains, Red Sox third baseman Fred Thomas—who was on leave from the Navy—snapped to attention and saluted the flag. The other players followed his lead. Then the fans—already on their feet—turned to face the flag as well. A few began to sing. Then more. And more—until it seemed every voice was raised. When it ended, the crowd exploded into cheers.

After that, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was sung at every World Series game. It soon became tradition to sing the anthem at all baseball games. Over time, the tradition spread to other sports as well.

Today, not everyone supports singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” before sporting events. Some find the anthem too violent and object to what they see as its glorification of war. Some argue that the song has nothing to do with sports. Others are simply put off by how hard it is to sing. But as what happened at the Bruins game in April 2013 shows, our national anthem still holds tremendous meaning for many Americans. And what better place to sing it than at a sporting event, where Americans of all different backgrounds—different races, religions, income levels, genders, and ages—can sing as one? •

An invitation to sing the national anthem is an honor. Beyoncé lived up to expectations at the 2004 Super Bowl!