

LOOKING FOR MR. JONES

THE OCEAN TECHNOLOGY FOUNDATION BEGINS A SEARCH FOR JOHN PAUL JONES' SUNKEN SHIP WHILE ADMIRAL CALLO TAKES A LOOK AT THE MAN.

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(Originally published in *The Log*, Navy League of the United States, New York Council, Summer 2006)

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John Paul Jones was America's first and, perhaps still is, its most famous naval hero. However, like many of the founding fathers, Jones' actual achievement has become clouded by legend. Indeed, historians even dispute whether he actually spoke the inspirational quotation: "I have not yet begun to fight." So, what is Jones claim to fame?

Jones' fame rests upon his victory at the Battle of Flamborough Head. Although Jones was a successful captain and peppered the Continental Congress with ideas that were later embraced by the United States Navy, Jones would not have stood out from a number of successful early commanders except for this one crucial victory.

When the long simmering animosity between Britain and her American colonies broke into open warfare, the rebels had no standing navy. Some merchant ships could be converted into warships and a few purpose-built warships could be constructed in American shipyards but the colonists would never have the ships, either in

number or quality, to challenge the world's largest seapower to a fleet action. Indeed, in an action in Penobscott Bay between 22 American ships and a 10-ship British squadron that included a ship-of-the-line, the Americans were all but wiped out. Still, rather than let Britain have unchallenged command of the seas, the Continental Navy did what many inferior naval powers have done throughout the course of history and concentrated on commerce raiding.

One particularly clever twist to the American strategy was the decision not to limit the activities of the Continental Navy to American waters but rather to attack commerce off of the British Isles. By so doing, the Americans would force the British to keep more of their warships at home. This in turn would mean that there would be fewer British warships off America to prevent American ships and those of sympathetic neutrals from landing much needed supplies. In addition, attacks on offshore shipping and attacks on sea coast towns would cause panic at home and would put political pressure on the British government to end what was not a popular war to begin with.

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John Paul Jones was an advocate of this strategy. Born in Scotland in 1747, Jones had gone to sea at age 13 and by the age of 21 was a captain of a merchant ship. However, in 1773, while in command of a ship in the West Indies, he killed the ringleader of a mutiny with his sword. Rather than stand trial in Tobago, Jones emigrated to Virginia and changed his name from "John Paul" to "John Paul Jones." He became a keen supporter of the patriot cause and, in 1775, was commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Continental Navy. After a successful tour on ALFRED, Jones became the captain of the sloop PROVIDENCE and his reputation grew.

In 1777, Jones was given command of the three-masted, 18-gun sloop-of-war RANGER. Operating out of French ports, RANGER began attacking British merchant ships in the waters off Britain and Ireland. He also successfully raided the port of Whitehaven. Then, within sight of Belfast, Ireland, he engaged and captured HMS DRAKE, a 20-gun sloop. Throughout the British Isles, there was panic over the exploits of "Paul Jones, the pirate." The embarrassed Royal Navy dispatched a squadron to seek him out. In short, exactly what the Americans had hoped for.

The exploits of RANGER aided American envoy Benjamin Franklin in his efforts to have the French supply the Americans with ships that would be used against France's traditional enemy. In early 1779, King Louis XVI purchased a 13-year old Indiaman called the DUC DE DURAS and placed it at the disposal of Jones. Indiamen were large merchant ships built to withstand the rigors of voyages between Europe and the Far East. Using cannons and materiel

supplied by the French, Jones converted the Indiaman into a frigate, which he named BONHOMME RICHARD after Benjamin Franklin's nom de plume.

While on paper BONHOMME RICHARD was a formidable fighting vessel, there were problems. First, the ship was feeling the effects of age, which, among other things, rendered her slower than purpose-built warships. Second, the French were not about to part with first-class supplies and what they gave, particularly the cannons, were items that the French Navy did not want. Third, Jones had to assemble a polyglot crew consisting of Americans, Frenchmen, and various other nationalities including some Britons. Only about a third of the crew spoke English.

In August 1779, BONHOMME RICHARD was made the flagship of a squadron of ships consisting of new American 36-gun frigate ALLIANCE, commanded by Captain Pierre Landis, the French frigate PALLAS, the FRENCH brig VENGEANCE, the French cutter LE CERF, and two French privateers, MONSIEUR and GRANVILLE. The squadron was to engage in commerce raiding around the British Isles and then rendezvous with a convoy that the British had blockaded in a Dutch port.

This was a powerful force. However, there was a big problem. Although Jones was the commodore of the squadron, his political enemies in the French Ministry of Marine had drawn up orders that allowed the other ships in the squadron to use their own judgment. Thus, they could ignore Jones's orders if they wished.

Four days after leaving harbor, MONSIEUR took a prize and then

abandoned the squadron. The other French privateer dropped out of the squadron for the same reason not long afterwards.

A few days later, the squadron became becalmed off the coast of Ireland and Jones, concerned that BONHOMME RICHARD might drift aground, sent out a boat to tow the ship seaward. Unfortunately, the coxswain had recently been disciplined and the remainder of the crew were homesick Irishmen. During the night, they cut the tow line and rowed ashore where they informed the British authorities that Jones was in the vicinity. A second boat sent out to look for the first became lost in a fog and was eventually captured by the British. LE CERF was sent to look for the boats but also became lost and returned to France.

The next day, Jones argued with Landis and although he was in the Continental Navy, Landis announced that he too was going to use his own judgment in all matters. Accordingly, Landis would take ALLIANCE off on her own when the mood suited him.

PALLAS then broke her tiller and fell behind.

Even though the squadron was left with only two ships, BONHOMME RICHARD and VENGENGE, it was a successful cruise as they took a number of merchant prizes while they sailed north around the top of Scotland. In addition, a British squadron scrambled to search for Jones was wasting its time in the waters off of Ireland. Eventually, PALLAS returned to the squadron with ALLIANCE appearing from time-to-time.

The squadron headed south down the North Sea taking several more prizes. Jones' plans to raid various

Scottish ports were thwarted either by the weather or by his captains' refusal to participate.

At about 3 p.m. on 23 September, off of Flamborough Head, Yorkshire, England, a lookout on BONHOMME RICHARD spotted a large group of sail to the north. It was a 40-ship British convoy bringing naval supplies from the Baltic. It appeared to be escorted by a frigate and a sloop-of-war.

Jones decided he would attack the frigate while PALLAS attacked the sloop. This left ALLIANCE and VENGENGE to deal with the convoy.

BONHOMME RICHARD bore down on the larger of the two British warships. Although HMS SERAPIS was rated as a frigate, she could have been classified as a small ship-of-the-line with between 41 and 50 guns arrayed on two gun decks. As Jones approached her in the early evening light, however, only the gun ports on one deck were open. When the two ships were about a thousand yards apart, Captain Richard Pearson, RN, called for the ports on the second deck to be opened unmasking a row of 18 pounders. Onboard the BONHOMME RICHARD there was an audible gasp as they realized that they were attacking a much superior ship. However, it was too late to go back.

Two additional factors favored SERAPIS. First, she had the new innovation of copper plating on her hull, which prevented sea growth. As a result, she was much faster and more nimble than Jones' ship. Second, her gun crews practiced an hour each day at their guns and could load, aim, and fire in a minute and a half - - twice as fast as Jones' crews. Consequently, she was

capable of a much greater rate of fire than her opponent.

After an unsuccessful attempt at persuading SERAPIS that BONHOMME RICHARD was also British, the two ships began firing. Jones followed the French tactic of aiming for his opponent's rigging while Pearson, in typical British style, aimed at his opponent's hull. BONHOMME RICHARD was immediately handicapped when some of her most powerful guns - - ancient 18-pounders - - burst.

It quickly became clear to Jones that if Pearson stood off from BONHOMME RICHARD, he would win as Jones could not match the weight of fire or out maneuver SERAPIS. Therefore, he attempted to move in closer in hopes of boarding. To this end, he stationed sailors and French marines in the rigging to fire down on SERAPIS should the ships come close enough to grapple.

A gust of wind allowed BONHOMME RICHARD to pull ahead of SERAPIS and Jones decided to attempt to cross his opponent's bow and rake her. However, the two ships collided with SERAPIS' bowsprit coming over BONHOMME RICHARD's deck. Jones quickly attempted to secure the enemy's bowsprit to one of his masts. Pearson tried to pull away but his anchor became caught on BONHOMME RICHARD's hull. The current then caused the two ships to come together side-by-side, bow next to stern. Jones used grappling hooks to further secure SERAPIS.

Then began a two and a half hour pounding match. SERAPIS' guns kept up their rapid fire into BONHOMME RICHARD's hull. Soon, all of the American guns had been silenced except

three nine pounders on the quarterdeck, one of which Jones was directing himself. Fires broke out and water began to fill the American ship.

SERAPIS was burning as well. Her mainmast and mizzen top had been shot away. In addition, the fire from BONHOMME RICHARD's rigging had rendered SERAPIS' open deck a killing field on which nothing could survive for long.

During the course of the battle, some of Jones' men panicked and attempted to surrender the ship. Jones threw his empty pistols at them, cracking one man's skull. Confused by these events, Pearson asked whether Jones was surrendering. According to some accounts, Jones replied "I have not yet begun to fight." Other accounts say the reply was: "No. I'll sink, but I'm damned if I'll strike."

Despite Jones' bravado, the British were winning. There was more than five feet of water in BONHOMME RICHARD's hold, her guns were all but silenced, and she was burning. To make matters worse, ALLIANCE had come along and fired several broadsides at the two ships which mostly hit BONHOMME RICHARD.

Meanwhile, high above BONHOMME RICHARD's open deck, a Scottish seaman named William Hamilton had a basket full of grenades. He worked his way out along the main yard until he was over SERAPIS and he began dropping the grenades. One fell through an open hatch into the lower gun deck and landed amongst the gunpowder. An explosion ensued rendering SERAPIS unable to fight any longer. Pearson struck the colors.

Although SERAPIS was badly damaged, she still could be made sea

worthy. Jones and the remainder of his crew labored to save BONHOMME RICHARD but 36 hours later as the wind increased, she went down.

While the flagship had been engaged, PALLAS had captured the other British warship, HMS COUNTESS OF SCARBOROUGH, despite also having received an unhelpful blast from ALLIANCE's guns. VENGEANCE had stayed off from the battle. As a result, all of the merchant ships had made it safely into port. Jones' squadron limped across the North Sea to Texel Roads, Holland. An outraged Royal Navy sent a squadron to blockade the port.

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, Jones may well have shivered when he wondered how posterity would treat him. He had lost his ship, in effect swapping it for one that was no longer in a condition to fight. Half of his crew was dead or wounded. The convoy that he had been attacking had slipped safely into port without loss while the battle was raging. His squadron was no longer an effective fighting force. Not only could it not continue to engage in commerce raiding but it was unable to complete its mission of escorting the convoy of badly needed supplies to France. Finally, the remains of his force were bottled up in a neutral port by a British squadron causing political problems for the neutral government and for America's French allies.

Why then is the Battle of Flamborough Head considered a great victory? First, the battle demonstrated that the Americans were capable of defeating the invincible British navy. Just as the defeat of a British army at Saratoga demonstrated that the rebels could win on land, Flamborough Head

showed that the Americans could win at sea. This gave the rebel cause more credibility both at home and abroad. Second, the battle had taken place within sight of land and, in fact, had been witnessed by thousands of Englishmen. As a result, there was increased public doubt about the war and pressure on the government to end the conflict. Third, Britain's heavy-handed attempts to pressure the Dutch into turning over Jones and his "pirates" to them was one of the factors that led to war between the Netherlands and Britain. Dutch bankers then helped the French buy supplies for the Americans. Finally, the battle is, and should be, remembered for the spirit shown by Jones and his men in refusing to concede defeat even when there was little prospect of victory. It is a spirit that helped shape the United States Navy.

In his latest work, Admiral Joseph Callo, USNR (ret.), presents the results of his search for the man who won the Battle of Flamborough Head. While much has been written about Jones over the last two centuries, his story is not as well known as his contemporary counterpart, Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson, hero of the Royal Navy. Thus, approaching this book, one asks who was this man?

This book is not romanticized hero-worshipping of a founding father. For example, we see that although Jones did such things as advance his own money to pay his crews' wages and prize money, he was faced with several mutinies during his career and desertions even from his most famous command BONHOMME RICHARD. Similarly, Jones was not able to impose his personality on subordinate captains so

that they happily followed his lead. The squadron at Flamborough Head was no “Band of Brothers” such as the one that followed Nelson at Trafalgar.

Along the same lines, Jones was not adept at spinning the wheels of politics. Even though he had friends such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, he was unable to obtain the ships and promotions he desired. This was also true when he was at the court of Catherine the Great, having accepted an admiral’s commission in the Russian Navy after it became apparent that he would advance no further in America. Once again, Jones had made political enemies who were able to use his stubbornness and womanizing against him to deny him the fruits of his victories over the Turks.

Make no mistake - - this is not one of those attacks on the founding fathers, fashionable in some academic circles, which confuse negativity with intellectual criticism. Rather, it presents a picture of a real person who was able to call upon some remarkable talents to do great things. We see that Jones, coming from a working class family, was able to rise to be master of a merchant ship in his early 20s. He was also one of the few persons placed upon the Continental Navy’s captains list who was not a political appointee. Thus, his abilities as a seaman were recognized even before Flamborough Head.

Although Jones’ background before the Revolution was entirely in the merchant service, he showed himself to be adept at military command; not just at Flamborough Head but in commerce raiding, in RANGER’s victory over DRAKE, and later as a fleet commander in Russia. These victories came about despite reluctant crews, uncooperative

subordinates, and the best laid plots of his political enemies. In short, the victory at Flamborough Head was no fluke but rather a manifestation of talent.

Admiral Callo’s analysis of Jones’ career is particularly valuable because he relates Jones’ actions to the problems encountered by modern naval commanders. Because of the differences in technology and lifestyle, it is easy to regard the people and events of the Age of Sail as belonging to a distant world. However, by demonstrating that the problems facing Jones were the same as those confronting commanders today, the reader is better able to understand Jones.

One is tempted to say that if a book is by Admiral Callo, one can be assured of its high quality. However, the book stands on its own. This is a concise history. It packs a great deal of information into less than two hundred pages. There are no wasted words. It is also a sailor’s book. Admiral Callo presents just enough of the history and politics of the time to place Jones’ naval career in context. The focus is on the man as naval commander. It makes one think and in so doing answers the question posed earlier.

On 18 May, the Ocean Technology Foundation (OTF) held a briefing at the New York Yacht Club to discuss a search of a different nature. In partnership with the Naval Historical Center, OTF will search the waters off Flamborough Head this summer for the wreck of the BONHOMME RICHARD.

With the television airwaves crowded with programs about underwater expeditions seeking everything from the TITANIC to Al

Capone's lost rubber duck, one would have thought that a ship of the stature of BONHOMME RICHARD would have been located and explored long before now. Indeed, unlike the wrecks of BISMARCK, HMS HOOD, USS YORKTOWN (CV 5) and TITANIC - - all of which have been explored, Jones' ship did not go down in the deep ocean but rather in less than 200 feet of water within sight of land. Still, the location of the wreck remains a mystery.

This situation is not the result of a lack of trying. In 1976, the American Bicentennial Administration, the Smithsonian Institute, and the Navy conducted an extensive search. Novelist and underwater explorer Clive Cussler, who discovered the submarine CSA HUNLEY, has been involved with several subsequent expeditions. The National Park Service conducted searches in 2002 and in 2004. All were to no avail.

The problem is that BONHOMME RICHARD sank in the North Sea - - an area that has been for centuries one of the busiest, stormiest, and fought-over stretches of water in the world. There are numerous wrecks. Furthermore, after two centuries there is probably not much left of a wooden sailing ship that had suffered extensive fires and battle damage before she sank.

One advantage that this expedition has over previous expeditions is Peter Reaveley. Mr. Reaveley has made a 30-year study of the Battle of Flamborough Head. Not only has he studied articles and personal accounts of the battle but he has studied the ship's construction and operation. Using Mr. Reaveley's expertise, the resources of the Naval Historical Center, and OTF's computers, the explorers have combined

historical information with data on wind, tides, currents and weather in order to develop a search area. This summer they will explore this area using the latest in underwater detection equipment.

Speaking at the briefing, Admiral Callo made some observations on the importance of the search for BONHOMME RICHARD. "Anybody who has gone to sea, anybody who has owned a boat knows that ships have a life. They are not inanimate objects. They are not just planks, and bolts, rigging, and blocks. They really do have a life. . . They take something from the people who take them to sea. If you agree with that, then you have to really, really feel something about BONHOMME RICHARD when you think about what happened and what was done in that ship. So, it is a life worth revisiting and focusing on."

"We too easily lose sight of what is involved with our military these days and what has been involved with our military since the Revolutionary War. There are people who go and do amazing things and are never recognized and even when they do heroic things are not recognized. There were 300 some odd men who were involved with BONHOMME RICHARD. There is no monument to them [but this project will be] a monument to them. If anything makes it very important and worth our focus, I think it is that last observation."