

PROOF of Madness?

BY REAR ADMIRAL JOSEPH F. CALLO, U.S. NAVAL RESERVE (RETIRED)

The brashness of youth was the hallmark of the first days of the Continental Navy, but the sea service quickly gained maturity as its commanders and men learned from their mistakes.

The birth of the American Navy was characterized in a letter written in 1783 to Robert Morris, who was at the time the agent of Marine for the Continental Congress: “Was it a proof of madness in the first corps of sea officers to have, at so critical a period, launched out on the ocean . . . to make war against such a power as Great Britain?”¹ The questioner was John Paul Jones, who was one of those Americans who had set to sea and challenged British maritime dominance.

Against Long Odds

When the Continental Navy was created in 1775, Great Britain’s national power was said to extend to the six-fathom curve of any landmass in the world, and the sheer number of her warships in the American theater during the Revolution was, by all obvious measurements, overwhelming. On average, for example, 90 Royal Navy ships—including about a dozen ships-of-the-line—were in American wa-

ters during the war. In contrast, when George Washington was appointed commander-in-chief of the American colonies’ military forces in May 1775, the national naval component of that new force was exactly zero.

For many years the ubiquitous Royal Navy ships in American ports and off the coasts of the North American colonies had

been a source of protection against the French and other imperial powers competing with Britain. Following the French and Indian War, however, the Royal Navy progressively became the instrument for enforcing onerous taxes and political restrictions on the colonies, exemplified in the extreme by the closing of the port of Boston after the Boston Tea Party. During that progression, Britain’s navy also increasingly inhibited the Americans’ ocean trade by enforcing the Navigation Acts. Those laws, which were passed by Parliament to protect British trade, often functioned at the expense of the colonies.²

First Steps

When Washington was appointed commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, however, the Royal Navy became much more than a political and economic problem, and Washington recognized from the outset a need for a Continental Navy. Of overriding importance, he had an army-in-formation without supplies, and his shortage of gunpowder





and lead for musket balls was particularly pressing. The colonies had few powder mills, and as the tide of rebellion rose, Britain placed an embargo on powder importation. A short-term answer, however, was to secure the needed military matériel by raiding Britain's ocean supply lanes, beginning in American waters. The added benefit to that response was that it conversely hampered the enemy's ability to sustain its own military supply needs. Thus, the first element of a naval strategy for the American Revolution was established: raid Britain's sea supply lines to provide Continental military equipment and deny the same equipment to the British.

The immediate problem for Washington was the absence of national naval resources to pursue the initial portion of a naval strategy. There were, however, modest naval militias among 11 of the 13 colonies. In addition, the American colonies had a tradition of effective privateering, a practice that had been a factor in the French and Indian War.

Initially, Washington tried to make do with what was at hand, and he turned to the governor of Rhode Island, Nicholas Cooke, asking him to use one of the small ships

of the Rhode Island naval militia to secure a store of powder known to be in Bermuda. Washington wrote to Cooke in desperation on 4 August 1775: "[O]ur necessities in the articles of powder and lead are so great as to require an immediate supply."³ But ships from Philadelphia and South Carolina had already secured the powder from Bermuda, and Washington would have to look elsewhere. He then wrote to General Phillip Schuyler in November 1775 of his intention to employ "armed vessels with the design to pick up some of their storeships and transports."⁴

Washington had reservations about acting without congressional approval, but he nevertheless decided to arm a

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JOSEPH F. CALLO

The chaos of the Battle off Flamborough Head in 1779 is depicted in this painting by English artist C. L. Doughty. While American Sailors and Marines attempt to board HMS Serapis, the Bonhomme Richard's carpenter (foreground right) reports to Captain John Paul Jones that his ship is sinking.

number of schooners to attack British merchant ships bringing military equipment to the American colonies and to divert the supplies those ships carried to his own army. The first of Washington's small naval raiders was the schooner *Hannah* out of Beverly, Massachusetts. That sturdy little fishing vessel, armed with but four guns positioned at hastily cut ports along her bulwarks, was leased to Washington's new Continental Army in September 1775 for \$70 a month. The ship's owner, Colonel John Glover, commanded a Marblehead unit in the army being assembled by Washington. After fitting out, another Marblehead man, Nicholas Broughton, was named captain, and officers were recruited from the local community. Finally, soldiers from Glover's unit were assigned as crew. It was a make-shift start of a naval effort, and the *Hannah's* initial deployment produced little matériel for Washington or, for that matter, prize money anticipated by her crew.

Despite the lack of quick success for the *Hannah*, Washington added to this inauspicious beginning, and before it was disbanded in 1777, his feeble fleet managed to capture approximately 35 prizes and provide at least some desperately needed ammunition and weapons to his army. The most noteworthy vessel taken by Washington's converted schooners was probably the merchant brig *Nancy*, captured in November 1775 by Captain John Manley in the *Lee*. The *Nancy's* cargo added 2,000 muskets, 30 tons of musket shot, 30,000 rounds of cannon shot, 100,000 flints, a number of barrels of powder, 11 mortar beds, and a brass mortar to Washington's struggling army. Manley went on to become one of the Continental Navy's most effective captains.

By the beginning of 1776, it was clear a more significant naval effort needed to be mounted against the British, but the path toward an effective Continental Navy faced significant political obstacles. For one thing, there was no clear balance of public opinion favoring the Revolution, much less one favoring a national navy. In 1775, when Washington took on the leadership of the Continental military,



NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

The first Continental Navy squadron was commissioned in Philadelphia Harbor on 3 December 1775. Then, the flagship's First Lieutenant John Paul Jones hoisted in the Alfred the first national flag to fly over an American ship, a scene depicted here by artist Al Mattay.

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roughly half of the American population was Loyalist. George Washington's mother and Benjamin Franklin's son were, for example, among many who vigorously opposed a war with Britain.

Congress Acts

But arguably the most significant problem to be overcome in establishing a Continental Navy was the lack of strong support in Congress. There, the major division was based more on regional self-interest than political ideology. The New England colonies and to some extent the mid-Atlantic ones favored the establishment of a national navy because of their economic dependence on ocean trade, fishing, shipbuilding, and other maritime-based activities. The Southern colonies, in contrast, were focused on their basically agrarian economies and convinced that there was no need

to raise and support a Continental Navy.

In addition, the colonies in the South tended to strongly resist anything that might diminish their individual political autonomy. They envisioned a loose confederation of independent states rather than a union with a strong federal government, and the formation of a Continental Navy would be a giant step toward the latter.

Compounding the regionally based obstacles to the establishment of a national navy was the financial problem. Until the Constitution was adopted in December 1791, Congress did not have the power to tax, and Continental Navy ships were paid for with foreign and personal loans and with paper currency that had virtually no permanent value. Arguably the most famous Continental Navy ship—the *Bonhomme Richard*—was basically a gift from the French.

Matters in Congress came to a head on 3 October 1775, when the Rhode Island delegation proposed establishing a navy that would serve all of the colonies. Initially, support for the proposal was less than overwhelming, but on 13 October, Congress managed to muster enough votes to pass a resolution authorizing the fitting out of two 10-gun vessels for a three-month deployment against British supply ships.

At the same time, a Naval Committee of Congress consisting of Silas Deane, Christopher Gadsden, and John Langdon was appointed. That date marked the creation of the Continental Navy and is now celebrated as the birthday of the Navy. The official congressional authorization for a U.S. Navy did not occur, however, until nearly 20 years later.⁵

The action on the 13th was followed on 30 October by an authorization for two more ships, plus the addition of John Adams, Joseph Hewes, Stephen Hopkins, and Richard Henry Lee to the Naval Committee. Both Adams and Hewes, soon joined by Philadelphia merchant-financier and member of Congress Robert Morris, would emerge as particularly important ongoing political leaders of the infant Continental Navy. Adams, for example wrote the first regulations for the service. For his part, Hewes, as chairman of the Marine Committee—which succeeded the Naval Committee in December 1775—is recognized as the first civilian head of the Navy. And Morris virtually ran the Navy single-handedly during the winter of 1776-77, when he stayed behind in Philadelphia after the British had driven Congress out of that city.

Political momentum for a navy continued to increase in Congress, and on 2 November it voted to purchase and fit out America's first operational squadron: the 24-gun *Alfred* and *Columbus*, 14-gun *Andrea Doria* and *Cabot*, 12-gun *Providence*, 10-gun *Hornet*, 8-gun *Wasp*, and the 6-gun *Fly*. All, with the possible exception of the *Fly*, were merchant ships taken up for service in the Continental Navy. There was neither the time nor money for purpose-built ships.

Then, on 10 November, Congress established the Continental Marines and appointed Captain Samuel Nicholas as its senior officer. In 28 days Congress had astonishingly managed to legislate into existence the two-edged military combination that would mature over the centuries into the world's most potent maritime force.

From Concept to Combat

Matters continued to accelerate, and on 3 December—a biting cold and clear day in Philadelphia Harbor—the precocious Continental Navy squadron was officially

commissioned. Its commodore, Esek Hopkins—with the misleadingly impressive title of commander in chief of the Fleet of the United Colonies—was piped aboard his flagship, the *Alfred*. During the ceremony putting the squadron in commission, an American flag was hoisted for the first time in an American naval ship by the *Alfred's* first lieutenant, John Paul Jones.

In January 1776, the Naval Committee of Congress ordered Hopkins and his squadron to deploy. Their mission was to clear the Chesapeake Bay and coasts of Virginia and the Carolinas of British ships harassing Continental vessels in those areas. Hopkins was then to return to Rhode Island, where he was, according to his orders from Congress, “to attack, take and destroy all the Enemies Naval force.” The mission that Jones would describe in hindsight as “madness in the first corps of sea officers” was about to get under way.

The tiny Continental Navy squadron that worked its way down the Delaware River toward the sea was paltry by British standards. It could have been very quickly dispatched by any one of scores of Royal Navy squadrons—probably even a single British ship-of-the-line—operating around the globe. But a crucially important circumstance favored the ships of the newborn Continental Navy: Much of the Royal Navy was occupied elsewhere. Despite the developing British control of the world's oceans in general, and despite its overwhelming superiority in naval units in American waters, the Royal Navy never had quite the number of ships needed to apply



W. NOWLAND VAN POWELL (COURTESY OF MRS. WILLIAM GREHAN)

In February 1776, the small American naval squadron, commanded by Commodore Esek Hopkins, sailed down the Delaware River and into the Atlantic on the Continental Navy's first deployment.

the level of naval power against the American colonies that could have ended the war in Britain's favor. It was a matter of the American Revolution being overshadowed, at least in the perspective of the political leadership in London, by the ongoing struggle between Britain and France and the naval requirements of that global conflict. Without that draining of naval forces from the American theater, the Royal Navy would in all likelihood have been instrumental in ending the Revolution and securing Britain's hold on the American colonies.

Capitalizing on the Royal Navy's inability to provide close protection of all of its assets in the American theater, Hopkins modified his totally unrealistic orders from Congress. He set his course for New Providence, now known as Nassau, in the Bahamas. His objective was considerably less grandiose than that of Congress, but it was consistent with the emerging naval strategy of General Washington and the steadily uniting colonies. Hopkins' primary objective was to capture the store of powder and other naval supplies believed to be at the Bahamian port.

The Gap Between Planning and Events

Like most wartime operations, unforeseen circumstances were associated with the actual events of the New Providence attack. To begin, during a storm the *Hornet* and *Fly* collided and were lost to the squadron. In addition, after an unopposed landing on 3 March—the first American Navy-Marine Corps amphibious assault—the troops discovered that the anticipated store of powder was gone. Apparently British intelligence was better than the Americans' ability to keep their mission a secret. The operation did net 88 cannon, 15 mortars, and 11,077 cannon balls, however, along with substantial amounts of other military munitions and three British officials who were taken prisoner.

On the return voyage an embarrassing brush with the 24-gun, small frigate HMS *Glasgow* near Block Island exposed among other things serious American shortcomings in naval tactics and gunnery. The confrontation also illuminated the difficulty of pitting converted merchant ships against purpose-built naval ships commanded and manned by experienced naval personnel.

The *Glasgow's* captain, Tyringham Howe, was both aggressive and skillful. Despite the significant numerical strength of the American squadron, he employed boldness and superior ship handling to inflict serious damage to the *Cabot* and *Alfred* and then escape from Hopkins' squadron. During the action, the American squadron performed more like an agglomeration of privateers than a disciplined naval force. Hopkins, who had been a successful privateer, and who had been appointed to his position as the senior officer of the Continental Navy through the political influence of his relatives, left something to be desired as a commodore. As a result, Congress censured him for his failure to press



W. NOWLAND VAN POWELL. (COURTESY OF MRS. WILLIAM GREHAN)

The merchant ship Sally, refitted as the 24-gun Continental Ship Columbus, escorts her captive, the supply brig Lord Lifford, in 1776.

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home an attack on the *Glasgow* and he was dismissed from the service in January 1778.

The action with the *Glasgow* was a naval reality check, and in the long run, its negative lesson about what it would take to face the Royal Navy at sea was probably more important than the mission's modest military success. The event also pointed out two other realities. One was the foolishness of appointing Navy leaders on the basis of political connections. The final important lesson of the expedition for General Washington and the Continental Congress was that a first-class naval force could not be produced on the spot or on the cheap; establishing naval power would not come easily for the Americans.

Notwithstanding the unsatisfactory *Glasgow* battle, however, the desperately needed artillery and munitions from New Providence were finally delivered to General Washington in early April 1777.

A Doctrine for the Future

America's first naval mission was neither tentative nor defensive despite the limitations of its very modest assets. The New Providence mission was, in its implausibly brash way, an example of how even a modest naval power could exert pressure on a vastly superior naval force that was stretched thin around the globe. And it established the second element of a Continental naval strategy: project naval force offensively against the enemy's centers of power. In the case of New Providence, a relatively minor British possession was the target. But in the future it would be the



British Isles themselves that would be attacked.

Of equal importance, the assault on New Providence also established a precedent that would build during the brief history of the Continental Navy and then, haltingly at times, mature through more than two centuries of America's naval history. That mission in 1776 to confront the enemy offshore was a small but important first step of the American Navy toward an ongoing naval doctrine, that union of overriding beliefs that determines in broad terms how a navy will fight. Hopkins' relatively short-range and slightly successful offshore projection of naval force to New Providence in the earliest

stages of the American Revolution was the modest but clear antecedent of the forward-leaning, basically offensive combat doctrine of the U.S. Navy of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

The Jones Factor

Although John Paul Jones' participation in the New Providence expedition was in a subordinate role as first lieutenant in the *Alfred*, the operation provided important initial military experience for him. With that deployment, he began his transition from a merchant ship captain to a basically self-taught naval leader who would, perhaps more than any other Continental Navy officer, assure the survival of the American Navy.

Jones' letter of 14 April 1776 to Joseph Hewes was a mixed review for the small squadron that attacked New Providence. He went on at some length, without naming names, to criticize the "rude ungentle treatment" of the junior officers and men by some of the captains.⁶ In all probability, the problem he was focusing on was that of captains with no military training acting the way they thought naval captains acted. On the other hand, Jones briefly praised Commodore Hopkins as a leader whose men "would go to any length to execute his orders." His criticism and praise touched on an extremely important issue for the Continental Navy: establishing good order and military discipline. It was an issue that Jones and other Continental Navy officers would continue to address during their careers. Their noteworthy failures and successes in that process were a necessary part of the progression from naval infancy to maturity that took place in the Continental Navy.

On 10 May, Jones was placed in command of the 12-gun armed sloop *Providence*. Demonstrating how truly informal

the organization of the new Navy was, his temporary appointment as captain was written on the back of his appointment as a first lieutenant. The *Providence*, like the *Alfred*, had been a merchant ship—the former *Katy* out of Providence, Rhode Island—before conversion for naval use, again reflecting the improvisational status of the Continental Navy. But as the Navy evolved, including many significant naval reverses at the hands of the Royal Navy, an event was approaching that would place a positive and indelible imprint on the U.S. Navy to come. It arguably was *the* event that assured a future U.S. Navy.

Reversal of Fortune

The colonies endured many dark days as the Revolution ground on. During those years, John Paul Jones conducted successful raids along the North Atlantic Coast in the *Providence* and against the British Isles in the 18-gun corvette *Ranger*.⁷ He also struggled constantly to gain command of increasingly powerful ships. During that process he wrote of his wish "to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast; for I intend to go in harm's way."⁸ Instead of a ship that sailed fast, however, Jones was eventually given command of a slow, converted French East Indiaman. He named the ship, provided by the French, the *Bonhomme Richard*, in honor of Benjamin Franklin, who used "Poor Richard" as a nom de plume. In August 1779, after a preliminary deployment in his second-hand, 42-gun frigate, Jones departed from Lorient, France, for his second mission in the *Bonhomme Richard*. In the coming months, he would have pivotal strategic and psychological impact on the war.

It should be noted that Jones was not the first Continental Navy officer to lead a squadron in the waters of the British Isles. Captain Lambert Wicks, who took several prizes in the English Channel in the 18-gun brig *Reprisal* in 1777, holds that distinction. But Jones was the first to maintain sustained raids in the waters off the British Isles and in ports along their coasts. Over slightly less than two months in the late summer–early autumn of 1779, he circumnavigated those islands, sank and captured considerable enemy merchant shipping, and created turmoil along the Irish, Scottish, and English coasts. He capped his deployment with a victorious single-ship action against the relatively new, purpose-built, 44-gun HMS *Serapis*. That achievement off the promontory of Flamborough Head—made famous by Jones' defiant "I have not yet begun to fight"—was as implausible as the initial establishment of the Continental Navy.

Of greatest importance, Jones' highly successful deployment and single-ship victory came at a time when America's naval fortunes were at a nadir. In late summer 1779, the plans of America's principal ally, France, for an invasion of England collapsed. An American amphibious operation against the British at Penobscot, Maine, in July-

August was a disaster, and an American-French force failed to retake Savannah, Georgia, between August and October. The defeat of one of the Continental Navy's few remaining operational units could have been the final bad news that

Jones, have earned special ranking in history. It was they who, above all other military leaders of the Revolution, assured the survival of an American Navy.



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Anton Otto Fischer, who produced illustrations for the *Saturday Evening Post* for 50 years, painted his idea of combat between the *Bonhomme Richard* and *HMS Serapis*.

resulted in the American Revolution ending in a stalemate or even an outright victory for the British.

In contrast, Jones' accomplishments sent a stunning message that mitigated the defeats: the Continental Navy could take the war to Britain, and it not only would fight, it could win in combat against the Royal Navy in Britain's home waters. Because of the confluence of those circumstances, the news of Jones' triumphs reverberated thunderously, not only in America but also in London, Paris, and other European capitals. In a sense, the victory of Jones and the *Bonhomme Richard* over the *Serapis* was to the naval component of the American Revolution what the Declaration of Independence was to the political phases of that war; it changed everything. The Continental Navy not only had survived its difficult birth, it had become a significant factor in the final outcome of the American Revolution. Combined with the clear-cut land victory of the Continental Army at Saratoga in October 1777, Jones and the men of the *Bonhomme Richard* created a tipping point for the American Revolution in September 1779 off Flamborough Head.

The Continental Navy's Key Catalysts

Numerous civilian and naval leaders played important roles in the birth and survival of the Continental Navy. But two military leaders, George Washington and John Paul

Washington, despite his background as an Army officer and farmer, recognized the essential need for a Continental Navy. He referred to that need frequently, never more concisely than when he wrote to French Lieutenant General Jean de Rochambeau in 1780: "Under all circumstances, a decisive naval superiority is to be considered a fundamental principle, and the basis upon which all hope must ultimately depend."⁹ In that statement Washington illuminated the third element of the Continental naval strategy, soon to be demonstrated at the Battle of the Chesapeake Capes on 5 September 1781: establish naval control at strategically crucial times and places.

On the other hand, John Paul Jones gave the Navy its soul. His contribution was born in naval combat and in the cause of political liberty for a new nation. That enduring legacy would be more than a hundred years in the making. But once formed, it would inspire an epitaph etched in marble at the head of Jones' sarcophagus at the U.S. Naval Academy. The words would burn into the consciousness of generations of Sailors in the U.S. Navy.

John Paul Jones 1747-1792 United States Navy
He Gave Our Navy its Earliest Traditions of
Heroism and Victory.



1. Robert C. Sands, ed., *Life and Correspondence of John Paul Jones, Including His Narrative of the Campaign of the Liman* (New York: A. Chandler, 1830) p. 305.
2. For insights on the impact of the Navigation Acts on the American Revolution see Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory—A Naval History of the American Revolution* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1974) pp. 8, 10, 18, 183-84.
3. Dudley W. Knox, *The Naval Genius of George Washington* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932) p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
5. Between the end of the Continental Navy in 1785 and the official establishment of the U.S. Navy by Congress in March 1794, the country had no navy.
6. John Henry Sherburne, *The Life and Character of John Paul Jones* (New York: Adriaance, Sherman & Co., second edition, 1851) p. 13.
7. *Ranger* was a purpose-built warship, and with 18 guns she was approaching the power of a small frigate of the Age of Sail.
8. Sands, *Life and Correspondence of John Paul Jones*, p. 146.
9. Miller, *Sea of Glory*, p. 452.

Admiral Callo's works include the Naval Institute Press books *John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior* (2006), *Nelson in the Caribbean: The Hero Emerges, 1784-1787* (2003), and *Nelson Speaks: Admiral Lord Nelson in his own Words* (2001). He also wrote *Legacy of Leadership: Lessons from Admiral Lord Nelson* (Central Point, OR: Hellgate Press, 1999) and cowrote *Who's Who in Naval History From 1550 to the Present* (Abington, Oxford, England: Routledge, 2004).