

# Battle off Flamborough Head:

## *A Pivotal Victory for American Independence*

by Joseph F. Callo



COURTESY MARINERS' MUSEUM

*Memorable Engagement of the Serapis and the Bonhomme Richard*, (artist unknown)

The impact of the battle between Captain John Paul Jones in the Continental ship *Bonhomme Richard* and Captain Richard Pearson in HMS *Serapis* on 23 September 1779 has gone largely unrecognized in most histories of the American Revolution. Jones's victory was in fact very important. His success was to the naval component of the Revolution what the Battle of Saratoga in 1772 was to the land war—it changed everything. The contest's unlikely outcome sent a message to the world: the American Navy, which had little success against the Royal Navy at that time, could fight, could win, and could take the war to British shores. That message added to Britain's anxiety that the price for a military victory over the American Colonies, if a clear-cut victory could even be achieved, would be exorbitant.

### THE RUN-UP TO BATTLE

The showdown took place within sight of Flamborough Head, a high, rugged promontory along England's Yorkshire coast.

Jones had reached that point toward the end of a deployment that left Lorient, France, on 14 August and took his small squadron northwards toward Ireland. His orders were to attack Britain's maritime lifeline and keep its population off balance with raids against their homeland. The squadron sailed along the west coast of Ireland, rounded the northern tip of Scotland, and then altered course to the south and sailed down the east coasts of Scotland and England. As Jones navigated around the British Isles, he attacked British commerce and created turmoil ashore. The *London Daily Press* of 21 September gave Jones's actions economic and psychological twists: "In consequence of the capture of so many colliers, and the interception of the trade, the price of coals will be enormous....Instead of having the domain of the sea, it is now evident that we are not able to defend our own coast from depredations."<sup>1</sup>

As he made his way down the coast of England, Jones spied a large merchant convoy just south of Scarborough

(roughly twenty miles northwest of Flamborough Head). More than forty ships, fully laden with valuable cargos, would make a very lucrative prize—consistent with the commerce raiding portion of his mission. As he chased the convoy to the south on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, other ships from his small squadron, including the new, 36-gun frigate *Alliance* and the 26-gun small frigate *Pallas* joined him. With those two ships and the 12-gun brig *Vengeance*, Jones had regathered nearly all the units of the small squadron with which he had started his deployment.

By that afternoon Captain Jones had learned from local pilots that what he was chasing was a Baltic convoy. As he closed the gap between his squadron and the convoy, his lookouts could discern two warships escorting the merchant vessels. One was the 20-gun former merchant ship HMS *Countess of Scarborough*, with a British Navy captain and likely a civilian crew. The other was the imposing 44-gun frigate, *Serapis*.

The British frigate was relatively new and sheathed with a copper bottom—a recent advance in naval technology. Coppering prevented marine growth on a ship's hull, making ships with this feature faster and more maneuverable than those, such as *Bonhomme Richard*, without it. Despite her rating as a 44-gun ship, *Serapis* actually had between 46 and 50 cannons at the time she met the 40-gun *Bonhomme Richard*. Jones, in his older converted merchantman, was over-matched in critical ways against the new, more heavily armed, and more nimble *Serapis*. Also, *Serapis*'s captain, Richard Pearson, was a thirty-year veteran with considerable combat experience, and her crew was likely somewhat better drilled in gunnery than the men of *Bonhomme Richard*. Nonetheless, Jones's squadron of four ships outnumbered the two Royal Navy ships, and significantly, *Bonhomme Richard* carried a larger crew complement than *Serapis*.

As Jones made his approach, Pearson signaled for the merchant convoy to alter course to the northwest and move into the protection of Scarborough Bay and the guns of Scarborough Castle. By 5:30PM of the 23rd, *Serapis*'s consort, *Countess of Scarborough*, had successfully positioned herself, with *Serapis*, between the convoy and *Bonhomme Richard*. Pearson's decisions were driven by his circumstances and his primary mission—to protect the convoy he was charged with escorting.

As the single-ship action between *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis* lined up, Jones planned to use his six 18-pounders to fire round shot at the hull and the

smaller 12- and 8-pounders to fire double-headed shot at her rig. Armed with muskets and small swivel cannons, *Bonhomme Richard*'s seamen and her complement of French Marines were positioned on the three small platforms of the ship's fore-, main-, and mizzenmast tops. First they were to clear the tops of the British ship of its marksmen and then sweep personnel from *Serapis*'s exposed decks. Jones was not planning radical tactics.

colors was a common tactic of the time) answered, "*Princess Royal*," the name of a British East Indiaman. Lying at a difficult angle for determining *Bonhomme Richard*'s nationality, Pearson shouted, "Where from?" Then, he threatened, "Tell me instantly from whence you came and who you be, or I'll fire a broadside into you."

In the meantime, Jones's turn to port apparently confused Landais in *Alliance* and *Pallas*'s French captain Denis Nicolas Cottineau. Landais hove to and Cottineau continued on a course taking him farther out to sea and away from *Bonhomme Richard*. Cottineau would eventually redeem himself, however, by capturing *Serapis*'s consort, HMS *Countess of Scarborough*, in a separate single-ship action. *Vengeance*'s captain Philippe Nicolas Ricot continued to simply stand off, which was about all he could do with his small ship. The confusion among Jones's squadron simplified the situation immensely for Pearson, and he turned his full attention to *Bonhomme*



*Flamborough Head is marked with a bullet on this 1780 map by Thomas Kitchin. The battle took place within sight of this promontory, while the British merchant convoy successfully made it to safe harbor in Scarborough, the closest anchorage along the coastline.*

When Jones ordered his small squadron to form a line of battle, *Alliance*'s captain, Peter Landais, a former French officer who had been commissioned in the Continental Navy, simply ignored his commodore's signal, consistent with his behavior from the beginning of the deployment. Pearson took advantage of the current and turned toward the shore and onto a port tack. Jones also turned to port and *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis* continued to draw closer in light winds.

Once in hailing range, Captain Pearson shouted, "What ship is that?" Jones, who was flying British colors (showing false

*me Richard*. The ships continued to close the distance between them. Heading in the same direction, *Bonhomme Richard*'s starboard side was facing the British ship's port side.

#### COMBAT ERUPTS

A single musket shot from one of the American ships cracked and echoed off the 100-foot-plus cliffs of Flamborough Head. Simultaneously *Bonhomme Richard* ran up her American colors and the two ships unleashed broadsides. A bridge of flame, shot, and smoke suddenly linked the two adversaries.

In the Age of Sail, victory frequently correlated with rates of fire, and it was not a good sign for the Americans when *Serapis's* second broadside ripped the air well ahead of their own second volley. Early in the exchange, several of Jones's old 18-pounders blew up, killing or wounding many in the gun crews.

Pearson, with the faster and more maneuverable vessel, raked *Bonhomme Richard's* stern several times with devastating broadsides. Knowing that he could not win a standoff gun duel, Jones put his ship across *Serapis's* quarter and attempted to board her. The American boarding party was thrown back, however, and Jones bore away.

Pearson attempted to cross *Bonhomme Richard's* bow to rake her stem-to-stern. He turned too soon, and *Bonhomme Richard's* bowsprit caught in the rigging on *Serapis's* starboard quarter. Clearly having the upper hand, Pearson shouted, "Has your ship struck?"—a logical question from a captain whose ship was demonstrating sailing superiority and a faster rate of fire. No captain in Jones's position could have been condemned for deciding to avoid additional bloodshed. John Paul Jones's response, however, sprang from his iron determination and commitment to a cause. He shouted, "I have not yet begun to fight." (Some biographers claim that Jones's immortal words were spoken later in the battle; others claim that he never used those exact words. The preponderance of evidence indicates that it was at this juncture in the battle that Jones shouted his now-famous defiance, and, when all is said and done, it was the idea, not the exact words, that has inspired generations of US Navy sailors.)

The battle roared on as darkness fell upon the two ships. Jones backed his topsails, and the entangled ships ripped apart; Pearson turned by wearing ship. Now on a parallel, reciprocal course with his adversary, Pearson backed his topsails, presumably to fall astern of *Bonhomme Richard* and rake her stern. Jones countered, turning to starboard, and the ships made contact for a third time, with *Serapis's* bowsprit entangled in *Bonhomme Richard's* starboard quarter. Unable to clear his ship,

Pearson's advantages of speed and agility were negated. *Bonhomme Richard* pivoted, so the ships lay bow-to-stern, starboard-to-starboard. Captain Jones worked to secure the two ships together with dozens of grappling irons from *Bonhomme Richard*. He even had his crew grab a forestay from *Serapis* that had parted and fallen across the American ship's deck and secured it around his own mizzenmast. Sharpshooters and seamen in *Bonhomme Richard's*

to board, but here the Americans' superior numbers drove the British boarding party back. By then, water was steadily rising in *Bonhomme Richard*, and her master-at-arms released the British prisoners captured in previous actions to man the pumps. They could have bolted and potentially tipped the balance of the battle against the Americans, but the British sailors set about saving the ship and themselves.

#### THE END APPROACHES

As the tide of battle was turning, a seaman from *Bonhomme Richard* dropped a grenade through a main-deck hatch of *Serapis* and onto the gun deck below. The explosion ignited large amounts of gunpowder that had been brought up from the magazine to supply the ship's main batteries. A series of secondary explosions neutralized *Serapis's* gun deck, silencing her main armament. With most of his guns silenced, rigging wrecked, and main deck swept by enemy fire, at about 11:15PM, Captain Pearson made the decision to surrender and stop the carnage. Nonetheless, he had successfully carried out his main mission—the British convoy had made it to the safety of Scarborough Harbor and lay at anchor.

More than 150 from the American crew of 322 lay dead or wounded, and more than 130 from the British crew of 284 were casualties. Later, Jones reported to Benjamin Franklin in Paris, "Humanity cannot but recoil from the prospect of such finished horror, and lament that war should produce such fatal consequences."<sup>2</sup>

In the final analysis, John Paul Jones's victory proved mostly a matter of doctrine, the overarching mind-set that has the ability to transcend tactics. Like most good combat doctrines, it could be summed up in a single phrase, "I have not yet begun to fight." Jones was fighting for the cause of liberty, a factor that ultimately outweighed fear and his drive for personal glory. Thus, his victory at the Battle off Flamborough Head fit with something that would be written by Napoleon Bonaparte more than twenty years later, "In war, moral considerations account for three-quarters, the balance of actual forces only for the other quarter."



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#### John Paul Jones

by Charles Willson Peale, from life,  
c. 1781-1784, Oil on canvas.

tops swept the enemy ship's exposed decks with deadly fire. Pearson let go his anchor; the complexion of the battle was rapidly changing.

Just past 8PM, the battle had been raging for slightly less than an hour. *Bonhomme Richard* had been blasted repeatedly by her enemy's rapid cannon fire. After the ships were grappled together, *Serapis's* crew took heavy casualties from the highly-accurate musket fire and grape shot from the American's tops and high poop deck. Both ships were on fire—the British ship burning mostly on and above her main deck and the American ship burning both above and below her main deck.

Now it was Pearson's turn to attempt

### THE AFTERMATH

Many deemed Captain Pearson the loser. Though he lost the ship-to-ship battle against John Paul Jones, he did succeed in his main mission. From the recognition that he successfully protected the merchant convoy, he was eventually knighted. Notwithstanding his knighthood, however, the ignominy of being captured by John Paul Jones—universally despised by the British as a renegade and a rogue—could not be expunged.

On the other hand, despite defeating his adversary in dramatic single-ship combat in their home waters, Jones failed to further one important objective of his deployment—capture or sink British merchant ships. Because of the fortuitous timing and overall strategic success of his deployment, however, he did become the best-known American naval hero of the War of Independence.

### THE STRATEGIC IMPACT

As the news of John Paul Jones's victory spread throughout England, there was a high level of concern in the local area about the potential of his continuing the raids he had been carrying out as he circumnavigated the British Isles. In London, newspapers broadcast the mounting concern over the implications of the outcome of the action between *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis*.

London's *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* of 27 September tried to put the best face on the situation: "[T]he *Serapis* and the *Countess of Scarborough* were obliged to strike.... There is the greatest reason however, to expect his [Jones's] squadron and prizes will yet fall into our hands as the *Winchelsea*, and three frigates of force are cruising off Yarmouth for that purpose." These ships were patrolling nearly 150 miles southeast of Flamborough Head, and the American squadron was already heading east, eventually towards The Netherlands and the Dutch island of Texel.



*Encounter off Flamborough Head - Bonhomme Richard and Serapis - September 23, 1779*  
by Paul Garnett, Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

(Prints of this Paul Garnett painting and others, each depicting John Paul Jones's ships *Ranger* and *Providence*, are available from *Sea History's* art gallery. See information on page 7.)

Although he was not the first American to make naval raids against the coasts of the British Isles, John Paul Jones was the first to mount sustained raids on those coasts with a squadron.<sup>3</sup> In less than two months, he circumnavigated the British Isles, threatened ports and captured and sank a substantial amount of enemy merchant shipping along his way. The military successes during *Bonhomme Richard's* deployment came at a time when America had suffered a series of shattering naval defeats at the hands of the British Navy at home. With a dramatic win against unfavorable odds, the news of the Battle off Flamborough Head echoed, not only in America, but in Great Britain, France, and throughout the rest of Europe. Its message was and is heard in every US Navy ship that has subsequently taken to sea.

John Paul Jones's achievements in *Bonhomme Richard* were a crucial psychological boost in America and a corresponding negative psychological blow on British public opinion and on their political and military leadership. In retrospect, the Battle off Flamborough Head was a fairly minor military victory that turned out to have a disproportionate effect on history. It also was the kind of phenomenon that matched an idea expressed by Admiral Lord Nelson, writing from HMS

*Victory* in 1804, "In Sea affairs, nothing is impossible, and nothing improbable."<sup>4</sup>

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Don C. Seitz, *Jones—His Exploits in English Seas During 1778-1780—Contemporary Accounts Collected from English Newspapers* (New York, E.P. Dutton and Company, 1917), 44.

<sup>2</sup> John Henry Sherburne, *The Life and Character of John Paul Jones* (New York, Adriaance, Sherman & Co., 1851), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Two other Continental Navy captains, Lambert Wicks in *Reprisal* and Henry Johnson in *Lexington*, had attacked British merchant ships in British waters in 1777, but neither raided ashore (as Jones did in *Ranger*), commanded a squadron, or had a dramatic single-ship victory over a significant British warship.

<sup>4</sup> *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, Vol. VI, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London, Henry Colburn, 1845), 133. ⚓

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