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Race to find flagship of first US naval hero - in North Sea

Teams from both sides of the Atlantic to search for wreck of John Paul Jones's frigate off Yorkshire coast

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Every US schoolchild knows that John Paul Jones, their country's first naval hero, rejected a call to surrender with the immortal words: "I have not yet begun to fight." What is less well known is that he was within sight of the Yorkshire coast when he uttered them.

Whether Jones ever said what was attributed to him is not certain. But it is true that one of the bloodiest naval battles of the American Revolution was fought in the North Sea on 23 September 1779, and that the American commander, despite having to abandon his sinking flagship, won the day. He captured the British warship attacking him and sailed off into legend.

This summer, 227 years after that encounter, British and American crews will again contend with each other off the coast of Yorkshire. This time they are in a race to discover the final resting place of the Bonhomme Richard, the 42-gun frigate commanded by the "Father of the American Navy". Jones's heirs in the US military are planning an underwater search, but they face competition from two other teams.

The adventure novelist Clive Cussler is backing a separate expedition by the National Underwater and Marine Agency (Numa), and a third team of local divers from Yorkshire will investigate a wreck in Filey Bay.

The Bonhomme Richard has long been a holy grail of marine archaeology, thanks to its association with Jones, said the naval historian Peter Reavely. "Britain has Nelson, and John Paul Jones plays the same role in the US. He is the greatest naval hero of the American Revolutionary War."

Despite repeated searches, the location of the wreck has remained a mystery. British divers believe the wreck of a wooden ship found in Filey Bay is that of the Bonhomme Richard, said team member Tony Green. "We think the wreck in Filey Bay is the most likely candidate - but we're still some way off proving it. There are three teams looking, so someone's got to find something."

Recent research by marine historians has cast doubt on the British divers' theory, and the US teams will focus their efforts further offshore.

The race to find the vessel will start in earnest this July, with the arrival of a joint team from the Naval Historical Centre in Washington and the Connecticut-based Ocean Technology Foundation. Later this year, Mr Cussler, who has already led unsuccessful expeditions in search of the wreck, is expected to launch a third mission.

Using hi-tech underwater scanning systems, the US naval team plans to survey large swathes of seabed off Flamborough Head. "We're going to have to survey at least 20 square miles of seabed to stand any chance of finding her," said Robert Neyland of the US Naval Historical Centre.

Originally named the Duc de Duras, the ship was built in 1765, then bought by the French government, which refitted her as a warship and lent her to the fledgling US Navy. John Paul Jones re-named her the Bonhomme Richard - after a magazine published by the US ambassador to France, Benjamin Franklin.

A Scotsman who started his seafaring career at the tender age of 13, Jones was considered a pirate by the British, but a hero by America's rebellious colonists. In 1779 he took the Richard and three other vessels on a raiding expedition around the British coast, hoping to draw the Royal Navy away from its blockade of American ports.

The squadron captured 13 ships before attacking a Royal Navy warship, the Serapis, which was escorting 41 British merchant vessels en route from the Baltic. After a savage four-hour battle, Jones captured the Serapis, but his ship was so badly damaged that it was abandoned. Safely aboard the British flagship, his crew escaped to Holland and eventually returned to America.

The rediscovery of Jones's flagship would be more significant than that of the Titanic in 1985, said Melissa Ryan, project manager at the Ocean Technology Foundation. "The Bonhomme Richard was lost in a battle of national importance: the first naval victory for America during the Revolutionary War."

The battle provided an early victory for the Americans, and convinced France to bankroll the rebel army, she said. "It was a turning point in our history."

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