



Image: Dean Mozabit, expedition artist

The *Bonhomme Richard* sank in the North Sea after receiving terrible punishment while defeating His Majesty's Ship (HMS) *Serapis* in 1779 in an intense battle off the northeast coast of England. Captain Jack Ringelberg (USNR, Ret), President of the Ocean Technology Foundation (OTF) based in Groton, Connecticut, is currently planning the most scientific effort yet mounted to search for *Bonhomme Richard* in 2006. OTF has teamed with the Naval Historical Center (NHC) to conduct this exciting expedition. 'The challenges facing the searchers are significant, but the historical circumstances of the battle, its inspirational impact on the US Navy in later years, and the new Continental navy's role in the Revolutionary War make the effort worthwhile,' says William Dudley, Former Director of Naval History in the US.

Many searches

'There have been many searches over the years, and local fishermen off England's North Sea coast have reported dragging over wrecks that have

torn up their nets, but so far no one has positively located and identified the wreck of *Bonhomme Richard*,' says Dudley. One major impediment is that the area's depth and weather are challenging and the seabed has been the resting place for unlucky ships for a thousand years, to say nothing of 20th century aircraft wrecks.

Major attempt

In 1976, American Bicentennial celebrations featured a major attempt to discover the resting place of *Bonhomme Richard*. Sidney Wignall, a British underwater explorer, formed the Atlantic Charter Maritime Archaeological Foundation and gathered backing for an expedition from the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, the Smithsonian Institution, the US Navy, several universities and Decca Systems Incorporated. Wignall made use of *Decca Recorder*, a survey ship belonging to Decca's international division, to search likely areas of the North Sea. Initially plagued by bad weather in early September 1976, the Decca crew located several anomalies within ten miles of

One of the enduring mysteries lingering from the American Revolutionary War is the location of Commodore John Paul Jones's flagship *Bonhomme Richard*

Flamborough Head, Yorkshire, including one at a depth of 150ft, with a ballast mound protruding 9ft above the seabed. Although this seemed a promising site, and presumably Wignall had the coordinates, it has not been relocated.

Novelist Clive Cussler, who discovered the submarine *HL Hunley* and many other shipwrecks, searched for *Bonhomme Richard* without result in 1978, 1979, 1984, and also in recent years. Donald Shomette, an historian and underwater archaeologist, dove a site in Filey Bay near Bridlington in 2000, with the assistance of local wreck divers belonging to the Filey Underwater Research Unit. He believes that the hulk they found has a strong chance of being Jones's lost ship but stops short of claiming it as *Bonhomme Richard*.

A team from the US National Park Service Submerged Resources Center visited the Filey

Searching for *Bonhomme Richard*



'I'll sink but be damned if I'll strike'

Daunting task

The task of relocating the wreckage of *Bonhomme Richard* is daunting, but Peter Reaveley, an OTF collaborator, has spent more than 30 years researching the battle and its aftermath and is providing all his research to OTF and NHC in order to do just that. If the OTF and its search team can locate and identify Jones's flagship, it would be a validation of this naval hero's accomplishments and do great service for US naval

history. OTF and NHC have the historical data, the journals, the eyewitness accounts, as well as knowledge of historic weather and tidal conditions that were in effect at the time of the sinking, and have even calculated the amount of iron ballast likely to be among the remains.

The search team is assembling the latest detection equipment and has enlisted a search vessel that can accommodate the crew and equipment for a multi-week effort to begin in June 2006. The expedition is in the planning and preparation stages, and sponsorship opportunities are available. The Surface Navy Association and the Naval Historical Foundation are key sponsors of the expedition. Private gifts and grants are still being sought, and OTF is hoping to raise at least US\$100,000 by 24 April, in honour of the 100-year anniversary of the celebrated return of Jones' body to America.

Neyland says, 'that the proj-

The history

In spring of 1779, King Louis XVI of France loaned a former French East India Company ship, *Le Duc de Duras*, to the US for Jones to command against British shipping. Dr Benjamin Franklin, head of the American Commissioners to France, provided a Continental Navy commission for the ship. Jones renamed the ship *Bonhomme Richard* in honour of Franklin's 'Poor Richard' and armed it with 40 guns of mixed quality and size. He sailed from L'Orient in August 1779 with several other warships in company, including the American frigate *Alliance*, 36-guns, commanded by Captain Pierre Landais and the French frigate *Pallas*, 32 guns, with Captain Denis Cottineau commanding. While sailing westward and then northward around Ireland and Scotland, Jones's squadron had much success in capturing British prizes, and by mid-September, he was heading southward in the North Sea within sight of the Yorkshire coast.

On the early afternoon of 23 September 1779, Jones's squadron sighted a merchant convoy under naval escort. HMS *Serapis* and

HMS *Countess of Scarborough* were protecting a convoy of 41 ships from the Baltic carrying vital timber and naval stores needed for the Royal Navy's shipyards. Jones wanted to capture some of the convoy but first had to take on Captain Richard Pearson's *Serapis*, a new 44-gun frigate. Jones attacked Pearson's ship, ordering Landais to cooperate, while Pallas attacked *Countess of Scarborough*. In the midst of a bloody four-hour action, Pearson asked if Jones intended to strike his colours, and Jones replied with the legendary words that he had 'not yet begun to fight,' or also reported as, 'No; I'll sink, but I'm damned if I'll strike!' The two ships fought on savagely until Pearson, with the convoy safely out of Jones' reach, ended the carnage by hauling down his flag. *Serapis*, badly damaged but still afloat, became Jones's prize while *Bonhomme Richard*, shot through and burning, gradually sank lower in the water. Jones shifted his flag to *Serapis* while his crew sought desperately but vainly to save *Bonhomme Richard*, which sank 36 hours later.

Bay wreck site in 2002 and 2004, but came away less convinced than Shomette that it is Jones's ship. Their research report is dubious about the wreck's identity, but they recommend that continuing ground truth efforts be made. It seems to be from close to the right period; however they have never been able to really do any excavation on it to determine whether the date range is right and whether it is a military vessel. Dr Robert Neyland, Head of the Underwater Archaeology Branch at the Naval Historical Center in Washington told *The Marine Scientist*: 'We had a look at some of their information in the past and looked at some of the historical documents and our interpretation of the historical documents is that the ship is probably further out to sea.'

ect team are currently hunting through historical documents and running computer models utilising the last sightings of the fleet, calculating drift with the wind and tide to give a high probability area. It is also attempting to initiate a geographic information system that brings together current maps, old maps, old wreck lists, and meteorological and geological information about the area.'

He explains, 'there are quite a number of wrecks around the area and it is going to make it intriguing to identify which one is *Bonhomme Richard*. Putting all this information together will allow us to create one map where all the wrecks are identified and located. The more information you have the more you can see patterns and come up with theories about where the wreck may be. We are trying to get our homework done first.'

Technological advances

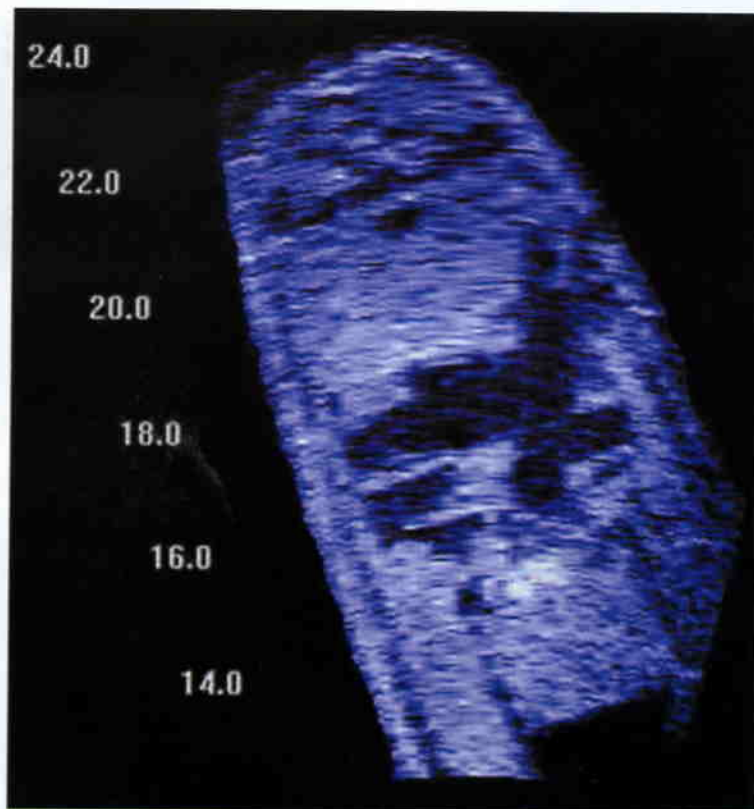
Neyland told *The Marine Scientist* that 'in the 1970s the choice was a sonar and a marine mag [magnetometer], which are still the main items being used but sonar systems have become much more sophisticated with multi-beam sonar. You now have a new sonar camera, which gives almost photographic images and can be used to explore a wreck on the bottom. 'We have just used this Didson camera very successfully to explore the civil war wreck in Virginia of the USS *Cumberland*. The key thing about this technology is that it can be used in extremely low visibility. The advances in global positioning also mean that you can be sure that you have surveyed every inch of the ocean and that you can pinpoint anything interesting.'

What's to find?

Once the project team locates the *Bonhomme Richard* is there likely to be anything left? 'This is very dependent on how quickly the vessel was buried,' says Neyland. 'If it was buried in the sediment soon after it sank you could



The Klein 3000 is an example of the high-tech equipment being used in the hunt



SEARCH FOR THE
Bonhomme Richard
 FLAGSHIP OF JOHN PAUL JONES

have pretty remarkable preservation, such as in the case of the *Mary Rose*. Certainly, you are going to have something – usually wooden hulled vessels because of the current and the conditions flatten out on the bottom – if they are not buried immediately'. He says that some things are more indestructible than others such as the cannon, shot, iron ballast and the wooden hull itself. He told *The Marine Scientist*: 'However, where there is rapid burial you have pretty remarkable preservation of organics such as leather, textiles and wood. Another project that we have been involved in is the recovery of USS *Alabama*, which is in French waters off Cherbourg and even though it has been in a high energy/high current environment, quite a bit of the hull and the artefacts are preserved. Even the officers' flush toilets have been preserved.'

When and if

What happens if it is discovered? 'The survey is just the initial phase,' says Neyland. 'The survey should come up with targets that need to be investigated in detail. There are a couple of ways to do that. Obviously you



The survey catamaran Lia operated by Osiris Projects

could dive on it and try to identify what the wreck is. However, you are more likely to rely on technology and use an ROV because it can work more efficiently in deeper waters and higher currents. However, they still can't replace the human eye and human hand when it comes to excavation.'

Nyland says that it is too early to say whether the wreck would be lifted and preserved like the *Mary Rose*. He says that the first stage is to make sure that it is the *Bonhomme Richard* and 'even if you find a ship of the right age and proportions, you still can't be certain.'

It is likely to be the circumstantial evidence, which includes defining artefacts from that period that will identify the ship. Certain aspects of the ship design might also help, as it was a French-built ship. 'If it all adds up then it will probably be the ship', says Neyland. 'Who knows, you might actually get lucky and find a silver spoon that has JPJ on it or the initials of some other crewmember who is known. Sometimes you do just get that lucky.'

He told *The Marine Scientist*: 'It

would be good to fill in the history pages that are blank about the battle and the make up of the crew and the life of the crew onboard. Archaeology can do that and perhaps write new books and add to our knowledge. This is what needs to be done before you even think about bringing the ship back up even if it is possible to do it. If you bring it up it then it becomes several lifetimes of responsibility.'

Outreach and education

'A strong educational component will be incorporated into the project in order to promote awareness and appreciation in students, teachers and the public of one of the greatest

The Geometrics Cesium Vapour Marine Magnetometer will be used in the hunt for the Bonhome Richard



battles in US naval history and the role of the Continental Navy in the Revolutionary War,' explains Dudley.

'Marine archaeology combines, history, marine science and technology together so it is really an interface between science and history', says Neyland. 'Just doing research for the ship itself can be very educational for the general public and school children and hopefully, what will come out of this is, if we discover the vessel, will be stimulating education. It brings history alive and also brings a certain amount of adventure to it and shows what can be done with modern technology.'

Online teacher workshops, curriculum materials and a website dedicated to Jones, *Bonhomme Richard*, and the Battle off Flamborough Head will be created. The website will also host 'virtual field trips' and logs that will be posted during the mission, and students will have opportunities to email the science and archaeology team.

Dudley says, 'Commodore John Paul Jones was one of America's earliest and most successful naval officers. The successful locating of his ship *Bonhomme Richard* will be a major news-making event and the most significant naval historical discovery since the *HL Hunley* in 1995. With more than 30 years of comprehensive archival research, modern oceanographic search equipment at OTF's disposal and a vessel in England already earmarked for use, conditions are now right for discovery.' ©