



DEAN MOSHER

Fire engulfs the Bonhomme Richard's hull near the end of her battle with HMS Serapis.

SEARCH for the Bonhomme Richard

BY WILLIAM S. DUDLEY

One of the enduring mysteries of the Revolutionary War is the location of Commodore John Paul Jones' flagship the *Bonhomme Richard*. The frigate sank in the North Sea after sustaining terrible punishment while defeating HMS *Serapis* in an intense 1779 battle off the northeast coast of England. The solution to the mystery, however, may soon be at hand.

Captain Jack Ringelberg, U.S. Naval Reserve (Retired), president of the Ocean Technology Foundation (OTF), is planning the most scientific effort yet mounted to search for the *Bonhomme Richard*. OTF, which is based in Groton, Connecticut, has teamed with the Naval Historical Center to conduct the exciting expedition in 2006. The challenges facing the searchers are significant, but the historical significance of the battle and of the new Continental

The Naval Historical Center is teaming with the Ocean Technology Foundation to locate the remains of John Paul Jones' most famous ship.

Navy's role in the Revolutionary War, as well as the *Bonhomme Richard's* and Jones' inspirational impact on the U.S. Navy in later years make the effort worthwhile.

In the spring of 1779, King Louis XVI of France loaned a former French East India Company ship, *Le Duc de Duras*, to the United States for Jones to command against British shipping. Benjamin Franklin, head of the American commissioners to France, provided a Continental Navy commission for the ship, and Jones renamed her the *Bonhomme Richard*, in honor of Franklin's "Poor Richard," and armed her 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 Captain Denis Cottineau's French frigate the *Pallas* (32). While sailing westward and then northward around Ireland and Scotland, Commodore Jones' 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.¹

On the early afternoon of 23 September 1779, the squadron sighted a merchant convoy under naval escort off Flamborough Head. HMS *Serapis* and HMS *Countess of Scarborough* were protecting a convoy of about 40 ships carrying timber and naval stores needed for the Royal Navy's shipyards. Wanting to capture as many of the merchant ships as possible, Jones first had to take on Captain Richard Pearson's *Serapis*, a new 50-gun frigate.

Jones attacked Pearson's ship, ordering Landais in the *Alliance* to cooperate, while the *Pallas* attacked the *Countess of Scarborough*, a 20-gun sloop of war. In the midst of a bloody four-hour action, Pearson called out, asking if Jones intended to strike his colors, and the American commodore replied with the legendary words "I have not yet begun to fight" (Jones' reply was also reported as "No; I'll sink, but I'm damned if I'll strike!"). The ships savagely fought on until Pearson, with the convoy safely out of Jones' reach, ended the carnage by hauling down his flag.

The *Serapis*, badly damaged but still afloat, became Jones' prize, but the *Bonhomme Richard*, shot through and burning, gradually sank lower in the water. Jones shifted his flag to the *Serapis*, while his crew tried desperately but vainly to save the *Bonhomme Richard*. She sank 36 hours later.

Over the years, there have been many attempts to find the frigate, but so far no one has positively located and identified the wreck of the *Bonhomme Richard*. American bicentennial celebrations in 1976 featured a major attempt to discover her resting place. British underwater explorer Sidney Wignall formed the Atlantic Charter Maritime Archaeological Foundation and gathered backing for an expedition from the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. Navy, several universities, and Decca Systems Incorporated. Wignall made use of the *Decca Recorder*, a survey ship be-



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The *Bonhomme Richard* was built in 1765 and as a French East Indiaman sailed under the name *Le Duc de Duras*. When Jones got command of the vessel in 1779, he renamed her in honor of Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard" and, as finally armed, she had six 18-pounders, 28 12-pounders, and six 9-pounders.

longing 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 Flamborough Head, including one at a depth of 150 feet that featured a ballast mound protruding nine feet above the seabed. Although the site seemed promising and presumably Wignall had the coordinates, it has not been relocated.²

Novelist Clive Cussler, who discovered the Civil War submarine *H.L. Hunley* and many other shipwrecks, unsuccessfully searched for the *Bonhomme Richard* in 1978, 1979, 1984, and more recently.³ In 2000 historian and underwater archaeologist Donald Shomette dove a site in Filey Bay near Bridlington, just south of Flamborough Head, 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' lost ship, but stops short of claiming it is the *Bonhomme Richard*.⁴ A team from the U.S. National Park Service Submerged Resources Center visited the Filey Bay wreck site in 2002 and 2004, but came away less convinced than Shomette that it is the remains of Jones' ship.⁵

The task of locating the wreckage of the *Bonhomme Richard* is daunting, but Peter Reaveley, an OTF collaborator, has spent more than 30 years researching the 1779 battle and its aftermath and is providing all his research to the foundation and the historical center in order to do just that.⁶ If the OTF and its search team succeed in locating and identifying Jones' flagship, it would be a validation of the naval hero's accomplishments and do great service for U.S. naval history. The foundation and the Naval Historical Center have the historical data, the journals, the eyewitness accounts, as well as knowledge of weather and tidal conditions at the time of the sinking. They 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 the multi-week effort scheduled to begin in June 2006. Expedition sponsorship

opportunities are available. Grant requests have been prepared, and public and private institutions are being approached for funding and in-kind support. The Surface Navy Association is a key sponsor of the expedition.

A strong educational component will be incorporated into the project in order to promote awareness and appreciation among students, teachers, and the public of one of the greatest battles in U.S. naval history and the role of the Continental Navy in the Revolutionary War. Online teacher workshops, curriculum materials, and a website dedicated to Jones, the *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 archeology team.

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



OCEAN TECHNOLOGY FOUNDATION

Captain Jack Ringelberg is the president of the Ocean Technology Foundation, which—along with the Naval Historical Center—will spearhead the 2006 search for the *Bonhomme Richard*. The frigate sank in the North Sea off Flamborough Head, Yorkshire.

¹John Paul Jones Manuscripts, Peter Force Collection, Library of Congress; John S. Barnes, ed. *Logs of Serapis-Alliance-Ariel*, Naval History Society (New York, NY, 1911). Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1959); Evan Thomas, *John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

²"Project Bonhomme Richard," Survey, Decca Survey Limited, 1976.

³Clive Cussler, *The Sea Hunters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 20-25, 285, 310.

⁴Donald Shomette, Research Report summary, published on website of Filey Underwater Research Unit.

⁵Filey Bay Shipwreck Site Reconnaissance, July 2004. Submerged Resources Center Technical Report No. 19, National Park Service; A joint product of U.S. National Park Service and Office of Exploration, U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

⁶See Reaveley's chapter "The Battle" in Jean Boudriot, *John Paul Jones and the Bonhomme Richard* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), pp. 64-91.

Dr. Dudley is the former director of naval history, Department of the Navy. For more information about the *Bonhomme Richard* expedition, visit the Ocean Technology Foundation's website at www.oceantechology.org/BHR.htm.