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Search launched for famous Revolutionary War ship

By **LANCE GAY**
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WASHINGTON -- Navy historians are joining with a nonprofit group to try and find Revolutionary War hero John Paul Jones' ship, the Bonhomme Richard, which sank in the North Sea in 1779 after confronting and beating British forces.

"If it was easy to be found, it would have been found years ago," said Peter Reaveley, an expert on the battle between the American frigate and the British warship HMS Serapis.

Although Jones won the battle and captured the Serapis, the Bonhomme Richard was badly damaged in the 3-1/2-hour battle on Sept. 23, 1779, and sank about 36 hours later during a storm in about 180 feet of water off England's Yorkshire coast.

The battle is considered to be the most significant confrontation between the royal navy and American warships during the Revolutionary War. Jones' bravado added to the confrontation's fame: He has gone down in history books as responding to an offer that he surrender: "I have not yet begun to fight."

The defeat in British home waters by a country that until then had no naval tradition was a deep embarrassment to the royal navy, which viewed Jones as a pirate. It also stung the Admiralty that Jones was born in Scotland. Three decades before the American Revolution, the British brutally suppressed a Scottish rebellion, outlawing Highland clans and cultural symbols such as Scottish plaids.

The French celebrated Jones' victory, and it convinced the French court of the wisdom of the decision to back the Americans in what was regarded at the time as a very unlikely fight against the mighty British crown.

Reaveley said several American and British expeditions have sought to find the wreckage of the 154-foot-long ship in recent years, without success. Reaveley, a retired Miami International Airport official, has spent 35 years trying to narrow down the area of the sea to be searched by piecing together the 18th-century tide patterns and weather conditions and collecting contemporary accounts of the battle.

Reaveley, who was born in England, said his hope is to retrieve one of the 42 guns from the ship that could be placed alongside Jones' memorial at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. "You need a goal in your life," he said.

The Naval Historical Center said it is joining with the nonprofit foundation, the Ocean Technology Foundation, in the expedition, which is scheduled to get under way next summer. Also collaborating in the search are researchers from the University of New Hampshire and English Heritage, the organization responsible for historic preservation projects in the United Kingdom.

John Ringelberg, a retired U.S. Navy captain and president of the nonprofit, said he doubts much is left of the wooden ship after two centuries on the ocean floor. The Bonhomme Richard was a former merchant ship rebuilt in France and outfitted as a frigate. Benjamin Franklin, America's envoy in France, arranged for the French to loan it to the United States after the Revolutionary War began.

Ringelberg said the Bonhomme Richard carried a large amount of iron ballast that will still give off a magnetic signature, as will the ship's cannon, thus aiding search efforts.

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"Historically, I think this is bigger than the Titanic," he said. "The more I read about it, this is the stuff that expeditions are made of."

Ringelberg said that the many wrecks in the region, the depth of the waters and a century of the ocean bottom being trawled by fishermen complicate the search. The area to be searched is off Yorkshire's Flamborough Head, an outcropping of land near the battle site.

Most of the fighting was at point-blank range. The Serapis had the advantage in having two rows of guns to fire into the side of the Bonhomme Richard, while the American vessel could return fire with only one row.

"The Serapis was really winning," Reaveley said.

But the fight ended when the ships were brought close to one another with grappling hooks, and an American seaman clambered along a mast to drop a grenade through an open hatch into the gun deck of the Serapis, where bags of gunpowder caught fire and exploded.

Richard Pearson, captain of the Serapis, then struck his colors, signaling his intention of surrendering. He later was exonerated in a court-martial and ended his career as governor of Greenwich Hospital, a prestigious post in the royal navy.

Reaveley believes the "I have not yet begun to fight" part of the story is an apocryphal addition by a Jones biographer. He said that one of the contemporary reports says the severe damage to the Bonhomme Richard was pointed out to Jones during the fighting, and that the captain was asked if he was ready to strike his colors. "I'll sink, but I'm damned if I'll strike," Reaveley said Jones responded.

The Bonhomme Richard was badly damaged, and Reaveley doubts that it was able to make much headway before the sea claimed it.

But if the ship is ever found, it might raise an issue with the French government. The French only loaned it to the new country. And although it sank flying an American flag, the French never got their ship back.

(Contact Lance Gay at GayL@SHNS.com. Distributed by Scripps Howard News Service, <http://www.shns.com>)

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