John Paul Jones

John Paul Jones was the first great American naval officer. He fought brilliantly against great odds and his victory over HMS Serapis during the American Revolution remains one of the most celebrated ship-to-ship encounters in history. In concert with John Barry, Jones helped establish the U.S. Navy's tradition of aggressive action and victory.

Born simply John Paul on July 6, 1747 in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland, Jones went to sea at an early age and at 21 commanded his own vessel. Tyrannically disposed, he flogged a ship's carpenter to death in 1770 and was brought up on murder charges. A court cleared him, but in December 1773 Jones killed the leader of a mutiny, and friends advised him to flee. He arrived in Fredericksburg, Virginia and added the alias "Jones" to his name.

Once the American Revolution began, Jones ventured to Philadelphia and tendered his services to the Second Continental Congress. He was subsequently commissioned senior lieutenant in the Continental Navy and posted aboard the Alfred, the first American vessel outfitted as a warship. In March 1776, he accompanied Commodore Esek Hopkins' expedition to Nassau, where his knowledge of the West Indies helped capture quantities of valuable war supplies. When Jones distinguished himself in action against the British frigate Glasgow that April, he received command of the sloop Providence.

Jones rose to captain in August 1776 and conducted a successful cruise that captured eight vessels and destroyed eight more. In November, he commanded the Alfred and took several additional prizes in the waters off of Nova Scotia. Unable to secure further promotion, Jones then sailed to France to assume control of a frigate being constructed there.

Jones arrived in France aboard the sloop Ranger only to find that the ship promised him had been sold. He then cruised Quiberon Bay in search of English shipping where, in consequence of the newly signed Franco-American alliance, the Ranger received the first official salute to the American flag from French warships on February 14, 1778.

Jones then sailed off the English coast, conducted several raids ashore, and subdued the 20-gun sloop Drake on April 24. He then remained idle at L'Orient, France until Commissioner Benjamin Franklin arranged for him to receive command of a French frigate, the dilapidated 40-gun Duc du Duras. Jones, delighted at the prospect of more fighting, renamed his ship Bonhomme Richard ("Poor Richard") and departed with a squadron of French vessels.

They cruised around the British Isles taking many prizes, but on September 23, 1778, Jones encountered the large 50-gun British frigate HMS Serapis off Flamborough Head. A desperate battle commenced by moonlight in which both ships, lashed together, pummeled each other at point-blank range for three hours. Jones, having lost nearly half his crew, was summoned by the British captain to surrender, but he retorted "I have not yet begun to fight!" and renewed the struggle. At length an American grenade ignited a magazine chest on the English frigate's deck, killing a score of sailors, and Serapis surrendered. Jones transferred his crew to the prize vessel and the badly battered Bonhomme Richard sank two days later. After a brief stay at the neutral Dutch port of Texel, he arrived back at L'Orient to a hero's welcome in February 1780.
Jones returned to the United States aboard the borrowed warship Ariel in February 1781. He received the thanks of Congress and command of the nation's first 74-gun ship-of-the-line, the America, then under construction, which was subsequently given to the French. Jones closed out the revolution by visiting France to negotiate payment for captured prize ships, whereupon King Louis XVI made him a chevalier. During his final trip to America in 1787, Congress voted him a gold medal, making him the only officer of the Continental Navy to be so honored.

In 1788, Jones accepted a rear admiral's commission from Catherine the Great of Russia and successfully fought the Turks in the Black Sea. When disputes with other officers forced his resignation, Jones left Russia in poor health and retired to Paris in February 1790. He died there two years later on July 18, 1792, obscure and forgotten. Jones' body remained in an unmarked grave until 1905, when it was exhumed and returned to America. Today, he rests in an elaborate tomb within the chapel of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and is hailed as the "Father of the U.S. Navy."

Further Reading

Fox, Joseph L., Captain John Paul Jones, Forgotten War Hero, 1987; Jones, John P., Memoirs of Rear Admiral Paul Jones, Compiled from His Original Journals and Correspondence, 1972; Morison, Samuel E., John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography, 1959; Smith, Joe, John Paul Jones: Scotland to America, Father of the United States Navy, 1991.

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