

“I Have Not Yet Begun to Fight!”

by Helen Mitchell and W. N. Wilson



It was August 14, 1779, when John Paul Jones put out of Lorient, France, in command of the squadron that Benjamin Franklin and the French king had finally procured for him. Jones was off to punish the British for their savage attacks on American coasts

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and property. He would carry the American Revolution to the enemy's own shores.

Only a man of Jones's daring could have expected success, for his flagship was a clumsy, hard-to-handle old tub. When Jones had first seen her, she had been a worm-eaten hulk—all that was left of the East India Company's *Duc de Duras*. But under his own watchful eye she had been rebuilt and renamed—the *Bonhomme Richard* (for Franklin, author of *Poor Richard's Almanack*). Turned into a warship, she was mounted with forty-two guns, but they were all ancient and worn out.

Sailing with the *Richard* was the new *Alliance*, one of the best of the Yankee navy, armed with thirty-six guns. But even this fine, swift man-of-war could not be counted on, for she was under the command of a treacherous, jealous, perhaps half-mad Frenchman. The other ships too—the *Pallas*, the *Cerf*, and the *Vengeance*—were captained by Frenchmen and were even French-owned. Moreover their officers had already persuaded Jones to sign a paper giving them the right to obey his orders only if and when they pleased. To make matters worse, Jones was uncertain of the men on his own ship. Few of them were Americans fighting for their homeland.

As Jones sailed north with this squadron—surely one of the least promising ever sent to sea—one of his ships, the *Cerf*, fled to France and the others left the *Richard* to cruise alone much of the time. Nevertheless, the little American captain rounded the British Isles, turned south, and began to fill the English with terror. Hardly a day passed that he did not capture or sink one or more of their ships and take the crews prisoner.

Then, at about noon on September 23, with the four remaining vessels together—an unusual situation—Jones sighted a fleet off Flamborough Head. Lying in wait, he soon discovered that it was made up of some forty merchant ships guarded by only two British men-of-war, the nearly new, swift *Serapis*, and the smaller *Countess of Scarborough*.

Gleeful and excited, Jones decided to strike at this, the richest prize yet! A light wind kept him from coming within fighting range of the enemy before seven o'clock that evening. Edging nearer and nearer, Jones signaled his ships to form a line of battle. But only two were ready for action. The flagship moved up to engage the *Serapis*, and the *Pallas* headed for the *Scarborough*. But the captains of the other two ships took positions at a distance, apparently waiting to see whether it would be safe to enter the fray.

At seven thirty, Captain Richard Pearson of the *Serapis* hailed, "What ship is that?"

To gain time for closing the range between him and the Britisher, Jones answered, "I can't hear what you say. Come a little closer."

Pearson hailed again. His only answer was a thundering broadside from the *Richard*. At almost the same instant, Pearson's entire battery opened fire. One of the most remarkable battles of naval history was under way.

In the beginning it seemed that the *Richard* must lose. At her very first broadside, two of her largest guns exploded, killing a large number of her men and badly damaging her deck. Still the *Richard* kept up a fierce, heavy shelling, dealing the *Serapis* many telling blows. But the British ship was

a much better sailer and could maneuver much more easily. Her guns soon tore into the *Richard*, leaving such great, gaping holes in her sides that she would have sunk had the sea been less calm.

Realizing that it was hopeless to go on in this way, Jones decided to try fighting at closer range. He swung his ship around, and as he did so, her rigging became entangled with that of the enemy, drawing the two vessels together securely.

It was now clear to everyone that the *Richard* was practically beaten. Clear to everyone, that is, but the American commander. When Pearson shouted, "Do you surrender?" Jones made the brief reply that stirred the hearts of all Americans: "I have not yet begun to fight!"

Twice the *Alliance* drew up and twice she fired—but at the *Richard*! Then she calmly slipped back into the distance. Again and again Jones's men demanded that he surrender, but the dauntless commander would not listen.

Then at last Jones sent his best marksmen into the *Richard*'s rigging to hurl hand grenades down on the *Serapis*. When one of these missiles fell through the enemy's main hatchway, it exploded a pile of cartridges, silenced most of Pearson's guns, and wounded more than fifty of his men. Jones himself now turned one of his three remaining guns on the weakened mainmast of the *Serapis*, and as it tottered Pearson hauled down his flag. About the same time, the *Pallas* came alongside, bringing the *Scarborough*, which she had taken, through the merchantmen had escaped. By ten thirty the battle was all over.

Although the valiant *Bonhomme Richard* sank the next morning, carrying her heroic dead and her flag to the bottom, she and her captain had won a great victory, the most brilliant naval victory of the Revolution. In defeating a superior ship of the greatest navy on earth, they had given new courage to the Americans struggling for their freedom and had gained the respect of the world for the infant United States.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. John Paul Jones and his squadron set sail from
 - A America
 - B France
 - C Spain
2. The *Bonhomme Richard* was named in honor of
 - A Benjamin Franklin
 - B George Washington
 - C Thomas Jefferson
3. The sailors in Jones's squadron were, for the most part,
 - A traitorous Britons
 - B unreliable Frenchmen
 - C loyal Americans
4. Jones could not count on the *Alliance*, because of her
 - A hostile captain
 - B obsolete equipment
 - C valuable cargo
5. Jones's five ships were reduced to four when the *Cerf*
 - A was captured by the enemy
 - B hit a reef and sank
 - C abandoned the squadron
6. The British fleet that Jones encountered was
 - A made up largely of merchant ships
 - B guarded by only two men-of-war
 - C Both A and B
7. The battle was delayed until early evening because of
 - A light winds
 - B heavy fog
 - C rough seas
8. Jones's squadron won the battle mainly because of his
 - A gallant fighting men
 - B stubborn determination
 - C more maneuverable ships
9. During the battle, the *Alliance*
 - A fired on the *Richard*
 - B captured the *Scarborough*
 - C surrendered to the *Serapis*
10. Shortly after the battle, the *Bonhomme Richard*
 - A sank to the bottom
 - B returned to the United States
 - C was towed to a French port