Recapturing the Unsinkable Spirit of the Bonhomme Richard

Benjamin Franklin must have been proud of the ship that bore his nom de plume; few ships of the Revolutionary War hold such a high degree of historic significance as the Bonhomme Richard. It was captained by John Paul Jones, who is often considered the father of the U.S. Navy.

The Bonhomme Richard had been lent to the U.S. by France and was named in honor of Jones's friend Benjamin Franklin, author of Poor Richard's Almanack, who at that time represented America in France and was instrumental in acquiring the ship.

Fighting for America's independence from British rule, Jones engaged the British ship H.M.S. Serapis on September 23, 1779, in one of the fiercest, most memorable battles in U.S. naval history. It was during this three-and-a-half-hour fight, most of it taking place at point blank range, that Jones was asked to surrender. In response, he shouted his legendary words, "I have not yet begun to fight!"

Amongst the crew engaged in the fierce conflict that day under Jones's command was a 24-year-old midshipman and patriot, Nathaniel Fanning, from Stonington, Connecticut. At Jones's order, Fanning led a group of men in leaping from the top of the crippled, burning Bonhomme Richard onto the top of the Serapis, then driving the British seamen from their own battle stations.

Against all odds, Jones emerged victorious and took control of Serapis. His beloved Bonhomme Richard had served him well, and eventually Jones watched his battered, burned, and flooded ship disappear beneath the waters of the North Sea. This fierce but pivotal battle was the first real naval victory for a very young America, and it showed the world that its Navy was a force to be reckoned with.

In addition, Jones's victory enabled the U.S. to borrow more resources from France to fight the war, and gave the American people a hero at a time when their spirits really needed a lift.

More than two centuries later, interest in the whereabouts of the remains of the Bonhomme Richard is stronger than ever. It is a common misconception that the ship sank at the battle scene, which was only about six miles off a point of land in northeast England called Flaborough Head. The ship actually drifted for a day and a half after the battle, while its crew fought day and night to keep it afloat. For the past year, the Ocean Technology Foundation (OTF), a small non-

Artist William Gilkerson depicted the Bonhomme Richard as it appeared in its heyday.
“It started as a hobby, then turned into an avocation,” Reaveley said. “Now it’s a quest.”

Using all of this data, Reaveley and the OTF were able to create an hour-by-hour account of the crew’s actions and the most probable positions of the ship. The OTF has coupled Reaveley’s historical research with the latest technology to create a computerized model that examines the drift course of the Bonhomme Richard after the battle. Using a combination of software programs meant to help locate missing objects at sea, such as a buoy that came loose from its mooring or a person that has fallen overboard, the OTF conducted about a dozen simulations which show the possible paths that the Bonhomme Richard may have taken during her drift. This information helped to determine the area where the team searched for the wreck.

In the summer of 2006, the OTF and its collaborators spent four weeks surveying 50 square miles of the North Sea to see if having done their “homework” would lead them to success. Aboard a small survey vessel, the team used a magnetometer, which detects large amounts of metal underwater, and a high-tech sonar system that can help to locate man-made objects on the sea floor.

The search team spent about 12 hours each day on the water, sometimes accompanied by a British television crew or newspaper reporter. The History Channel spent two days on board the vessel taking footage for a future documentary. “The crew found it a bit disconcerting at first to have large cameras always pointed at us and our every word recorded throughout the day, but we soon got used to it, and enjoyed giving interviews to the media,” said Ringelberg.

In addition to images of countless boulders, fascinating geological features, and the occasional modern shipwreck, the team returned to the U.S. with sonar images of four wreck sites that they think could potentially be the Bonhomme Richard, and which warrant further exploration next summer. Data processing is currently taking place at the Naval Historical Center, and will produce a mosaic of these sites so that analysts can get a more complete picture of what they look like. The OTF is already planning next summer’s expedition, where they will use a Remotely Operated Vehicle, a type of tethered underwater camera, to get close-up views of
the target sites and take some video and still images for further analysis.

One of the unwritten rules in archeological surveying is that it’s important to remember that many fascinating discoveries have been made while looking for something else. The team may discover other shipwrecks that might be of cultural or historical interest, even though they weren’t looking specifically for them.

One of the most popular questions the search team is asked is, “How will you know you’ve found the Bonhomme Richard?” The answer is that it will most likely be a case based on circumstantial evidence. The ship was badly damaged and made of wood, so there is a chance that much of it may not have survived the high-energy, heavily fished environment of the North Sea.

However, it is known that the ship carried more than 200 tons of metal ballast, and still had many of the crew’s and Jones’s personal items on board when it sank. Items like guns, cannons, plates, coins, cooking utensils, edged weapons, glass or ceramic objects would be the items most likely to still exist. Putting together the clues that these items would offer can help to identify the ship. For instance, seamen often carved their initials onto their tankards, or drinking mugs. Initials or names found on such items could be correlated to the names on the list of Bonhomme Richard’s crew members. The size, types, and locations of cannons are known, and this information could also play a key role in identifying the Bonhomme Richard. The team will certainly know more after next year’s expedition.

The OTF believes that the Bonhomme Richard Project is meant to be shared with teachers, students, and the public. Prior to last summer’s expedition, team members gave presentations to hundreds of people, and visited schools to spark the interest of students from ages 9-17. A website, http://www.bonhommerichard.org, is dedicated to expedition updates and photos, historical information about John Paul Jones, and much more. It even hosts an interactive diagram of the battle. The project lends itself well to teaching a wide array of topics including science, naval and American history, marine technology, engineering and mathematics. Lesson plans which focus on the technologies used in the search and the historical significance of the battle are currently underway.

The Bonhomme Richard Project is not just about searching for a shipwreck. It’s about inspiring people to become aware of our maritime history, and to be proud of it, because it has helped to shape who we are as a nation today.

About the Author: Melissa Ryan is a UConn graduate, and the Project Manager and Director of Education for the Ocean Technology Foundation. She oversees all aspects of the Bonhomme Richard Project, and develops the education and outreach initiatives for all of OTF’s programs.

This painting by artist Dean Mosher captures the flaming battle between Bonhomme Richard and a British frigate, off Flamborough Head, northeast England, in 1779. The men of Bonhomme Richard lashed their damaged vessel to the enemy ship and took control. It was a landmark victory but sadly the end of the feisty vessel.