



Bonhomme Richard vs Serapis: Flamborough Head 1779 (Duel)

Mark Lardas

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The clash between the American Bonhomme Richard and the British HMS Serapis during the American Revolutionary War is perhaps the most famous single-ship duel in history. This epic battle between two very similar ships - and crews - off the coast of Britain in September 1779 created two naval heroes: in victory John Paul Jones became a figure that all future American naval officers would aspire to emulate, while Richard Pearson, in defeat, became a hero to the British for a tenacious defense that allowed the merchant vessels under his protection to escape.

In September 1779 five warships loosely commanded by John Paul Jones and sailing under the American flag - although all but one had all been loaned or donated by France, a key American ally - were moving down the Yorkshire coast when they encountered a Baltic merchant convoy of over 40 ships escorted by two British vessels, the Serapis and the Countess of Scarborough. A confused encounter battle culminated in the Bonhomme Richard, already severely damaged by British gunnery, deliberately colliding with the Serapis as John Paul Jones strove to board and capture the Royal Navy vessel before his own sank beneath him. The two ships continued to exchange devastating fire at point-blank range; an American grenade exploded on an arms chest on the Serapis, causing massive destruction on deck. Even so, the outcome of the battle remained inconclusive throughout the night until the British captain Richard Pearson, seeing that the merchant vessels under his protection had reached safety, reluctantly decided to surrender to his exhausted adversary. The Countess of Scarborough also surrendered, and the American squadron (minus the Bonhomme Richard, which promptly sank) were able to escape with their two prizes, observed by thousands of onlookers from the Yorkshire coastline.

Featuring specially commissioned full-color artwork, this is the story of an epic maritime clash at the height of the Revolutionary War that provided a founding legend for generations of US naval officers and demonstrated the intrepidity and fighting prowess of the fledgling American Navy.

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