

# Searching for the *Bonhomme Richard*: A Tale of Two Navies

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What do three French Navy (FRN) vessels, one U.S. Navy (USN) autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV), a team of explosive ordnance divers, a towed side-scan sonar, and a magnetometer have in common? They were all used in the 2012 search for the *Bonhomme Richard* (*BHR*), a sailing warship, which is an iconic symbol of America's fighting spirit and colorful maritime history. The *BHR* was commanded by U.S. naval hero John Paul Jones during the American Revolution and was lost off the east coast of England after a ferocious battle with the British vessel *HMS Serapis* in 1779. Although Jones was victorious, the *BHR* drifted for 36 hours afterward, as his crew tried to save the ship. By then, Jones had taken command of the *Serapis* and watched from its deck as the North Sea mercilessly claimed ownership of his beloved vessel. Jones did not, however, note which direction the ship had drifted or how far it had moved, making the quest to locate its resting place extremely challenging.

Finding the remains of one of the most significant U.S. naval warships

would rekindle public enthusiasm for America's naval heritage, allow for further studies on the construction of Revolutionary War vessels, and present the only means for interpreting the lives of the *BHR* crew members, of which little is known.

The Ocean Technology Foundation has been spearheading the search for the *BHR* since 2006 and, through seven major expeditions with its partners, has surveyed more than 600 square miles of seabed. The USN has provided significant support to the project over the past few years, with the use of the Submarine *NRI*, the USNS *Henson*, an oceanographic survey ship, and the salvage ship USNS *Grasp*, which supported a team of Navy deep-sea divers (Figure 1).

## FIGURE 1

A team of USN divers prepares to investigate a target to see if it is the *BHR*. Photo: M. Ryan.

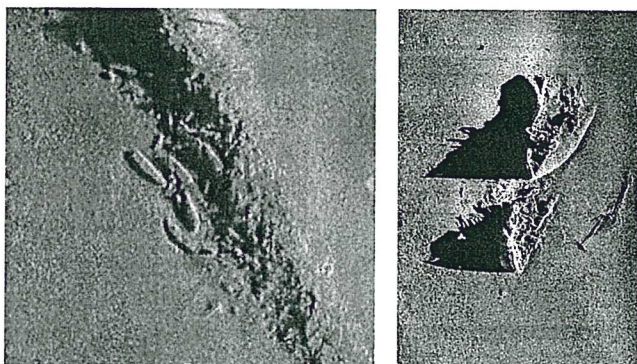


Since 2009, the FRN has also provided strong support with mine-hunting and survey vessels, remotely operated vehicles, an AUV, and teams of divers. French interest in the project stemmed from the importance of the *BHR* to both U.S. and French maritime heritage. The *BHR* was loaned to the United States by France as a symbol of the two nations' strong alliance during the war.

The 2012 search was the most complex and collaborative operation yet. A French hydrographic ship equipped with side-scan sonar and a magnetometer scanned the seabed for the first week of the mission. During the next two weeks, a sonar-towing ship worked in tandem with a dive support ship to more closely investigate targets previously found (Figure 2). A USN team operated an AUV from the dive support ship, providing opportunities for training FRN divers in its application, and using it to further classify targets. A new technology was also applied to this year's survey. The USN's P-3 Orion aircraft, equipped with a magnetic anomaly detector, flew over the search area to see if it could detect a debris field of iron ballast, which would be key to locating the *BHR*. Data from the entire survey will be reviewed over the next few months, but what is also worthy of review is the tremendous value of the USN-FRN partnership. For perspective, it is important to relate history, technology, and military involvement, because all three are critical in the search for the *BHR*.

## FIGURE 2

Sonar images can be misleading. The cannon-shaped objects in the image on the left were large rocks that cleaved off the nearby ridge. The image on the right is of a modern, well-preserved sailing vessel. Images: Ocean Technology Foundation.



### U.S. Navy Perspectives John C. Harvey, Jr.

There is perhaps no single battle that has defined both our Navy's relationship to our nation and our Navy's view of itself as the battle between the *BHR*, under the command of Capt. John Paul Jones, and HMS *Serapis* off Flamborough Head, England, in 1779.

The *BHR*, whose name lives on in our Navy today, was given to the fledgling Continental Navy by the French to assist the United States in its fight for independence from England. As it turned out, the French not only gave us a fighting ship but also made possible the birth of a fighting Navy, epitomized by John Paul Jones' legendary reply when questioned whether he had surrendered, "I have not yet begun to fight!"

Those words and the spirit that accompanied them have inspired our Navy ever since, wherever we have sailed and fought over the past 233 years.

This historical reminder of the importance of the *BHR* in today's Navy does much to explain the historical relationship between the U.S.

and French navies, a solid relationship that has grown stronger over the years. And given this long standing relationship and the importance of the *BHR* to our Navy, it is then easy to understand the USN's enthusiastic participation in the search for the wreckage of the *BHR*. The collaboration in this search is a small part of the cooperation between our two navies that takes place every day, all around the globe. From actions in support of the people fighting for freedom in Libya in 2011 or com-

bined operations between the *Dwight D. Eisenhower* Carrier Strike Group and the French carrier *Charles de Gaulle* earlier this summer (Figure 3), the French and U.S. navies are strong partners at sea, just as we were in 1779 when John Paul Jones took the *BHR* to sea and fought the battle whose story would endure forever.

The search for the *BHR* continues, and I was very proud to be able to support it these past three years. Just as the *BHR* defined our Navy at the birth of our nation, so does the search define our relationship with the FRN and our recognition of our shared maritime history.

### Perspectives From the French Navy Bruno Deméocq

When asked about French participation in the Revolutionary War, the names that come to mind are Lafayette, Rochambeau, and sometimes Count de Grasse, the admiral who won the Chesapeake Bay battle on September 5, 1781, and made possible Yorktown a few weeks later.

## FIGURE 3

The French carrier *Charles de Gaulle* meets the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* at sea for joint training operations. Photo: USN.



The *BHR* episode is unknown in France, even in the Navy. There are many good reasons to “Find the *Bonhomme*,” as one crew designated its mission (Figure 4). One of them is to restore this important page of our common political and naval history and put in perspective the events of this period (e.g., the first time a U.S. flag was given a salute at sea and the Flamborough Head battle against HMS *Serapis*).

Concerning this battle, it is rarely mentioned that the troops on board were from a French Army regiment, which makes this battle probably *the* first combined joint effort and our first naval cooperation two years before the Chesapeake Bay battle. This significant page of our naval history must be revived, and as a sign of destiny, it is interesting to note that a French historian, Alain Boulaire, in April 2012 published the first book in French on John Paul Jones.

Another reason to pursue the quest is that our navies cooperate

every day and have been doing so since 1779. It is thus natural that the search for the *BHR* be a combined effort, even more so since it rests in the North Sea. As a direct link with the search, our U.S. and French mine warfare and oceanographic communities have been working closely together, as they have done in the past and will do in the future. There is a continuum of cooperation in those fields as there is in others such as naval aviation, antisubmarine warfare, and antiterrorism, to mention a few. Every opportunity to cooperate is important because it gives us the chance to learn from each other and to train together so that, when the next mission comes, we will be ready to integrate smoothly in a combined task force and accomplish the mission. A symbol of our ability to work together is the high degree of interoperability achieved in the naval aviation realm. In 2008, five French fighter aircraft spent 4 days on board the USS *Roosevelt* at sea, flying joint missions and conducting training. No other two navies have attained this level of trust and partnership, and the search for the *BHR* serves to strengthen this relationship even more.

nating marriage of history and ocean technology. From nuclear submarines to aerial magnetometry to record-setting deep dives, this search is about pushing the limits of technologies and people in an extreme environment, and each has held its own in the most impressive ways.

Will the *BHR* ever be found? Only when it wants to be. But in the meantime, its story inspires personal investment and interest from the hundreds of people who have been involved in the surveys. And it encourages citizens everywhere to become aware of their country’s maritime heritage and to be proud of it, for that history is what has helped to shape our nations today.

For more information, please visit [www.bonhomme-richard.org](http://www.bonhomme-richard.org)

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### FIGURE 4

The motto of the 2009 FRN mission. Photo: M. Ryan.



### Conclusion

This search is a quest that belongs to everyone—the interested citizen, the history buff, the men and women on active or retired military duty, and the young student whose interest in marine technology is piqued by reading about the *BHR* missions. Although the project began in 2006 as a shipwreck search, it has evolved into an international collaboration between two navies and a fasci-