

Did He Say It?

Did John Paul Jones really say: “I have not yet begun to fight”?

That he said something to this effect is not in doubt. Whether he uttered these precise words is less certain. Richard Dale (Jones’s first lieutenant on *Serapis*) is the source of the precise quote, writing in his account of the engagement between *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis* that, early in the encounter, a few minutes after *Richard* ran her bow into the stern of *Serapis*, “we were . . . hailed by the *Serapis*, ‘Has your ship struck?’ To which Captain Jones answered, ‘I have not yet begun to fight.’” Dale was certainly in a position to know what Jones said. The problem is, he did not provide his account until 46 years after the battle, in response to a request by Jones’s early biographer, Col. John Henry Sherburne (who then reproduced it in his biography).¹ Dale’s memory could have faded by then.

Nathaniel Fanning, a midshipman on the *Bonhomme Richard*, also published an account of the battle in 1808. According to Fanning, at a somewhat later point in the battle than Dale remembered it, “The enemy . . . demanded of us if we had struck. . . ‘If you have,’ said they, ‘why don’t you haul down your pendant;’ as they saw our ensign was gone. ‘Ay, ay,’ said Jones, ‘we’ll do that when we can fight no longer, but we shall see yours come down first; for you must know, that Yankees do not haul down their colours till they are fairly beaten.’”²

The earliest account we have of the incident is from an affidavit by seven *Bonhomme Richard* deserters that they gave the day after the battle and that was published a week later in several London newspapers: “In the engagement between the *Serapis* and Paul Jones, his vessel was so disabled, that the Captain of the *Serapis* called out to Jones’s to strike, else he would sink him. To which the latter replied, ‘that he might if he could; for whenever the Devil was ready to take him, he would rather obey his summons, than strike to any one.’”³ The affidavit, despite its proximity to the event, contains a number of blatant falsehoods (e.g., that Jones murdered seven of his crew), thus putting in doubt the reliability of the quotation. Other English newspaper accounts published at the time also reported the exchange but with different wording attributed to Jones. Here are two examples, the first from the *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, the second from the *London Evening Post*: (1) “The engagement soon grew desperate, and Jones, beside having a great part of his crew shot round him, had his rigging on fire for about seven minutes. In this interval the Captain of the *Serapis*, who was so near to him as to be audible, called out to him to strike, or he must

infallibly go to the bottom. Jones replied, with an oath, ‘He may sink, but he’d be d_____d if he’d strike.’”⁴ (2) “Captain Pierson . . . asked Jones if he had struck? (at this time the flag was shot away) ‘No, Sir,’ says he, ‘I have not as yet thought of it but am determined to make you strike.’”⁵

Dr. Benjamin Rush, writing sometime between 1800 and 1813, recalls Jones giving “a minute account of his engagement with the *Serapis* in a small circle at dinner. . . . Towards the close of the battle, while his deck was swimming in blood, the Captain of the *Serapis* called him to strike. ‘No sir,’ said he,—‘I will not,—we have had but a small fight as yet.’”⁶ The date of the dinner is not recorded, but Samuel Eliot Morison (one of Jones’s biographers), apparently parsing the whereabouts of Rush and Jones, concludes it must have occurred between 1781 and 1783—thus 17 or more years prior to Rush writing down his recollection.⁷

Jones wrote twice himself about the exchange (not, however, in his log). First, in a letter to Benjamin Franklin dated October 3, 1779, penned shortly after safely reaching the Texel in Holland, he summarized the incident but did not say what he said: “The English commodore asked me if I demanded quarters, and I having answered him in the most determined negative, they renewed the battle with double fury.”⁸ Second, in his *Memoir of the American Revolution Presented to King Louis XVI* (1787) which now exists only in a French translation by André, he quotes himself as having said, “Je répondis au capitain anglais: Je ne songe pointe a me rendre; mais je suis déterminé a vous faire demander quartiere.” H. Niles (1812) translates this as “I do not dream of surrendering, but I am determined to make you strike.”⁹ This is sufficiently similar to the version published in the *London Evening Post* of October 9-12 (*supra*), sourced in Amsterdam at the time Jones was at the Texel, as to make one suspect that the *Post* article was based on an interview with Jones himself. Indeed, the *Post* quote may even be the precise words Jones wrote in his *Memoir* that André translated.

Captain Pearson, in a letter dated October 6, 1779 written while he was Jones’s prisoner, acknowledged that he’d asked Jones if he had struck but said Jones did not answer: “At Ten o’Clock they called for Quarters from the Ship alongside, and said they had struck: Hearing this, I called upon the Captain to know if they had struck, or if he asked for Quarters; but no Answer being made, after repeating my Words two or three Times, I called for the Boarders and ordered them to board, which they did”¹⁰

Finally, a version of the exchange, not dissimilar to Dale's recollection, made its way into a popular English ballad—the following version published in 1813: “The battle rolled on, till bold Pearson cried: / ‘Have you yet struck your colors? then come alongside!’ / But so far from thinking that the battle was won, / Brave Paul Jones replied, ‘I’ve not yet begun!’”¹¹ Perhaps Dale was aware of the ballad and his recollection was influenced by it. Or perhaps the ballad was based on something Dale was overheard to say (he visited London after the Revolutionary War).

For sure, Jones said something defiant. “I have not yet begun to fight” captures the spirit, if not the precise words.

Robert Hornick
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¹ John Henry Sherburne, *Life and Character of the Chevalier John Paul Jones, A Captain in the Navy of the United States, During Their Revolutionary War* (Washington: Vanderpool & Cole, 1825), 126-27.

² Nathaniel Fanning, *Fanning's Narrative: The Memoirs of Nathaniel Fanning An Officer of the American Navy 1778-1783* (1808; repr., New York: William Abbott, 1913), 42.

³ “Affidavit,” *London Evening Post*, September 28-30, 1779; “Saturday Night’s Post Concluded,” *Chester Chronicle and General Advertiser*, October 8, 1789.

⁴ “London, October 1,” *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, October 1, 1779.

⁵ “London, Extract of a Letter from Amsterdam, Oct. 8,” *London Evening Post*, October 9-12, 1779.

⁶ Benjamin Rush, *A Memorial containing Travels Through Life or Sundry Incidents in the Life of Benjamin Rush* (Philadelphia: Louis Alexander Biddle, 1905), 121.

⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography*, Time Reading Program Special Edition (New York: Time, 1964), 240.

⁸ Reprinted in Sherburne, *Jones*, 120.

⁹ *Niles' Weekly Register* 2 (July 4, 1812): 297.

¹⁰ “Letter from Pearson dated Oct. 6, 1779,” *London Gazette*, October 9-12, 1779. Buell, in his discredited biography, purports to quote Pearson as saying something more at his court martial: “Hearing, or thinking that I heard, a call for quarter from the enemy, I hailed to ask if he had struck his colours. I did not myself clearly hear the reply; but one of my midshipmen, Mr. Hood, did hear it, and soon reported it to me. It was to the effect that he was just beginning to fight.”

Augustus C. Buell, *Paul Jones, Founder of the American Navy, A History*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 1:225. Thursfield repeats the same quote. James R. Thursfield, *Nelson and Other Naval Studies* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1909), 221. But this is surely a Buell fabrication; the transcript of the court martial does not include any such statement. See Reaveley, Peter, transcript of British Admiralty Court Martial re battle, 10 March 1780, yorkshirehistory.com, archived from the original on 2011-05-16, retrieved 2007-11-02,
http://web.archive.org/web/20110516155430/http://www.yorkshirehistory.com/flam/Court_Martial_transcript.htm.

¹¹ Anonymous, "Paul Jones' Victory" (1813), <http://pdmusic.org/naval/13piv.txt>.