

said that Jones's "three trifling sloops or brigs" were "scarce fit to have sacked a fishing village," much less the capital of Scotland.³² But their presence in the Firth of Forth nonetheless struck fear and terror in the hearts of the local Scots. Alarm and panic grew. Along the coast, women, children, and valuables were being moved inland. Militias were mustered in anticipation of a landing. Letters were sent to the Admiralty, demanding protection. At Kirkcaldy, as Jones's squadron entered the firth, a local clergyman sat on the beach and prayed God to turn the winds and blow the scoundrel Jones out to sea.³³ Benjamin Disraeli (the future prime minister), trying to articulate the terror that was felt, would later write, "The nurses of Scotland hushed their crying infants by the whisper of his name."³⁴

Jones continued southward, past Scarborough, toward Flamborough Head, eluding British naval vessels in search of his fleet, capturing several more prizes along the way. On the morning of September 23, 1779, off Flamborough Head, *Pallas* (which had gotten separated) and *Alliance* (which had left two weeks before) reappeared and rejoined *Richard* and *Vengeance*.

Battle Off Flamborough Head; Capture of *Serapis*

Some lives build slowly to a single moment of glory or shame. Jones's was such a life, and Flamborough Head was such a moment. On the afternoon of the twenty-third, Jones saw in the distance, off Flamborough Head, a fleet of forty-one sails. He learned from pilots of pilot boats captured earlier in the day that it was a British convoy from the Baltic, escorted by the fifty-gun frigate *Serapis* and the twenty-gun sloop of war *Countess of Scarborough*. Jones knew the importance of Baltic convoys: they were major suppliers to the British navy. He also knew he would have to take or sink the two escorts, if he was to interdict the convoy.

"There is no doubt," writes Morison, "that *Serapis* was a newer, faster and more nimble frigate than *Richard*; and in fire power, owing to her far greater number of eighteen-pounders, she was definitely superior."³⁵ *Bonhomme Richard*, by contrast, was a slow vessel, much slower than Jones had wanted. But what it lacked in speed, it made up for in durability. It could, in Evan Thomas's words, "withstand heavy blows."³⁶ Heavy blows it was about to be dealt.

At four o'clock *Richard's* gunners and seamen took up their battle stations. At five drums began to roll as Jones issued the general order to prepare

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for battle. At six—sunset—Jones signaled *Alliance*, *Pallas*, and *Vengeance* to form a line of battle. All three ignored the order. *Richard* would have to fight *Serapis* alone. And so it did. (Ultimately, *Pallas* would engage and defeat the *Countess of Scarborough*.)

It was a battle, fought in moonlight at close quarters “with unremitting fury” (Jones’s words), vicious and bloody. *Serapis* gained the upper hand several times—so much so that, at one point, Captain Pearson of *Serapis* shouted to his adversary, “Has your ship struck?”—meaning “Have you raised the white flag? Are you surrendering?”—to which Jones famously replied, “I have not yet begun to fight.”

Flamborough Head is a promontory of chalk cliffs just south of Scarborough, 450 feet top to bottom, jutting into the North Sea. Crowds from Scarborough and other nearby towns had gathered on the cliffs to watch, attracted by rumors of the impending battle and the sound of gunfire. We do not have any eyewitness accounts from the cliffs, but even from the distance of their vantage it must have been a sight: two ships maneuvering against one another in the moonlight, firing repeated broadsides, the explosion of struck guns and gunpowder, flames and smoke enveloping the carnage. Jones, nothing if not a brilliant tactician, determined that his only chance for victory was to ram *Serapis* and lash *Richard* to it, thereby preventing *Serapis* (because of too close quarters) from further firing its twelve- and eighteen-pounders and enabling Jones’s marksmen, strapped to *Richard*’s topsails, to fire down onto *Serapis*’s deck, killing all who did not retreat below. This was done, and it had its intended effect: *Serapis*’s deck was cleared, a grenade tossed from *Richard*’s mainsail struck the combing of *Serapis*’s upper hatchery, fell between decks, and ignited gunpowder that had spilled from cartridges abandoned by *Serapis*’s powder monkeys scurrying for cover, resulting in a dreadful explosion that killed or wounded dozens of the enemy’s crew huddled between decks. *Serapis* surrendered.

Not, however, before *Alliance*, under command of Captain Landais, entered the fray and began firing—at *Richard*, not *Serapis*! There were three separate broadsides, killing several of *Richard*’s crew and further damaging the American vessel. It was not an accident. Landais, though he later pretended otherwise, saw it as an opportunity to rid himself of his nemesis, Jones. Fortunately, the *Alliance* intervention was too little, too late: Jones and *Richard* survived, and victory went to the Americans.

Captain Pearson of *Serapis*, despite his surrender, did have one consolation: the ships of the Baltic convoy that he was escorting had found safety under the guns of Scarborough Castle and were unharmed.

The carnage on both sides was extensive, the bloodiest naval battle of the War of Independence. It had lasted about four hours. The American side suffered 150 killed or wounded. British casualties were 50 to 100 killed and 68 wounded.³⁷ *Richard*, though it had withstood heavy blows long enough to ensure victory, could not be saved. After trying to do so for two nights and a day, Jones ordered it abandoned, and it sank into the North Sea at eleven on the morning of the twenty-fifth.

The British, when they learned of the battle, dispatched a large squadron to find and capture Jones. It reached Flamborough Head on the twenty-eighth and, assuming Jones would try to escape to the north and west (as he had done on his prior cruise, after capturing *Drake*), headed that way. But once again, Jones eluded capture, this time by heading south toward Holland (aboard *Serapis*, flying the American flag), while his pursuers searched in the opposite direction. He arrived safely at the Dutch island of Texel on October 3, 1779, with two prizes—*Serapis* and *Countess*—and 500 prisoners.

He was born to command. A Cossack sailor known only as Ivak, who served under him, said as much: “I have never seen such a person, sweet like a vine when he wished, but when necessary, like a rock. . . . One movement of his hand you obey like a commanding voice. It seems that some people are created to command.”³⁸ At Flamborough Head, the genius of Jones’s command—his preparation, his courage—was on full display, and the victory gained there was a signal achievement.³⁹ Fame and glory followed. France welcomed him with laurel wreaths and open arms. “The cry of Versailles and the Clamour of Paris,” wrote John Adams, “became as loud in the favor of Monsieur Jones as of Monsieur Franklin, and the inclination of the Ladies to embrace him almost as fashionable and as strong.”⁴⁰ King Louis XVI invested Jones with the rank of chevalier in the Order of Military Merit and presented to him a gold-hilted sword inscribed, in Latin, with an appreciation for his valor. He was inducted into the Lodge of the Nine Sisters, the most prestigious Masonic lodge in France, whose members included the leading intellectuals, artists, and politicians of the