

2005

## John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy,

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### Recommended Citation

Cate, Alan (2005) "John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy,," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 58 : No. 1 , Article 23.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol58/iss1/23>

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Thomas, Evan. *John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003. 381pp. \$26.95

America seems to have lately rediscovered its founding fathers, if recent best-seller lists are any indication. As much as the infant republic needed thinkers and statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Ben Franklin, it also required those who were willing to fight and turn their aspirations into reality. Francis Marion, Daniel Morgan, “Mad” Anthony Wayne, and even Benedict Arnold were among the warriors who concretized fine words and ideas into battlefield deeds. One more name that belongs on this fierce list is John Paul Jones, the father of the American navy.

Thomas, a *Newsweek* editor and amateur sailor, offers a marvelous portrait of a proud, insecure, ferocious, and highly ambitious figure. He convincingly suggests that Jones was that most elemental of American characters, the self-made man. Although Jones most likely never made the celebrated declaration “I have not yet begun to fight” during the epic sea battle between his *Bonhomme Richard* and HMS *Serapis*, he did possess an unconquerable spirit. This is a splendid biography of John Paul Jones.

The penniless son of a Scottish gardener on the run from the law, John Paul adopted the surname Jones and sailed to America. Possessing an unslakable thirst for glory, a genius for seamanship, a combative nature, and a Gatsby-like desire to be recognized as a gentleman, Jones offered his services to the cause of American independence. Along the way, he accumulated many grievances—some imagined, many not. He did not feel appreciated or rewarded

by Congress. Jones watched desirable commands handed over to corrupt and incompetent hacks, and he suffered mutinous crews and disloyal officers. Indeed, comparison with Benedict Arnold, another prickly sort, is instructive. Both gifted men were at times disgracefully ill used. The difference is that Jones ultimately placed duty over self.

In Thomas’s hands, the real-life story of this courageous master and commander is every bit as enthralling and humorous as any Patrick O’Brien novel. Thomas writes colorfully of blackguards and mistresses, salty sea dogs and young midshipmen, bloody quarterdecks and Parisian salons. He also provides a thrilling description of Jones’s apotheosis—the *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis* duel. His depiction of riding out a terrific storm is better than the obligatory chapter found in fictional yarns, as are the evocations of the sights, sounds, and smells of shipboard life in the age of sail. Simultaneously, Thomas perceptively evaluates Jones as tactician, strategist, and leader. Unparalleled at tactics, Jones was also surprisingly advanced as a strategic thinker who devised schemes to bring the war to the British home islands and foresaw the need for the United States to field a blue-water navy. It is only as a leader that Thomas finds Jones wanting. Audacious, persistent, and visionary, the brittle Jones lacked what we today would call team-building skills to inspire subordinates to consistent greatness. Nevertheless, Jones’s legacy is well summarized by the words engraved on his tomb at Annapolis: “He gave our navy its earliest traditions of heroism and victory.”

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