

Commodore John Barry

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



For centuries now, historians have argued which naval heroes is more deserving of the title “Father of the American Navy.” The battle lines are most clearly drawn between their ethnic partisans: A member of the Saint Andrew’s Society is guaranteed to side with the John Paul Jones, just as a Friendly Son of Saint Patrick will favor the taller John Barry.

Some naval historians are not as swayed by Jones’ bravado. Taking a page from Barry’s reserve, as opposed to Jones’ swagger, they implicitly seem to side with the man they admiringly call “Silent John.”

Naval heroes such as Stephen Decatur, Jr., Richard Dale, Charles Stewart, Jacob Jones, and William Montgomery Crane, all who became commodores, started their naval careers under Barry’s watchful eye, as did Richard Somers, of Tripoli fame. (These men participated in the Barbary wars as well as the war of 1812 when the US was establishing itself as an independent nation.) During the War of 1812, the *Port Folio* of Philadelphia, an influential American magazine at the time, wrote, “So many of the distinguished naval men of the present day commenced their career under Commodore Barry that he may justly be considered as ‘the father of our navy.’”

Barry and Jones took a similar approach to leadership from the ship. While they were both expert mariners, Barry was more popular with his men, but Jones is regarded as a better visionary with numerous letters to congress about ship designs and requesting a need for a naval academy.

But all this discord and noise take away from one simple fact. In real life, while their call to service prevented them from seeing much of the other, they were as friendly as two sea captains could be. They both shared meals and talked of their service in the American navy. Their last breakfast together was in May 1783. Barry and his ship the *Alliance* were stateside after another slew of captures and winning the Revolutionary War’s last battle at sea which were fought weeks after the Treaty of Paris ended the conflict. Jones was in such a state of ill health that Robert Morris canceled orders sending him to Boston to preside over a court-martial of Lieutenant Simpson. Over the meal, Barry told Jones he was sailing the *Alliance* to Holland on a merchantman’s errand, and Jones happily wrote a letter of introduction on Barry’s behalf to the appropriate people in Amsterdam, requesting that “as Captain Barry is an entire stranger to Holland any civilities you may show will the more Oblige.” They never saw each other again. Jones went on to serve in the Russian Navy and Barry set sail to China to help open trade in the Orient. When the American Navy was reinstated, President Washington gave Barry the first captain’s commission in the United States Navy.

As it turned out, Barry and Jones were buried in respectively befitting manners. Jones final resting place would be the place of his dreams. He lies beneath the Naval Academy Chapel. His tomb is center stage encased in marble, a grand tribute but with one sad note. He is buried alone, the eternal warrior and bachelor.

In Philadelphia, Barry is buried at St Mary’s Roman Catholic Church with his wife Sarah, family, and friends, in the city he adopted and that adopted him.

Both were different men but shared a kindred spirit. Both shared similar opinions of their fellow officers. When Barry died among his possessions was a cameo of John Paul Jones. He also bequeathed Jones’ gold sword to Richard Dale, the officer who served both so gallantly in

the Revolution. You will find it by Jones' crypt where you will also find Commodore Barry's bible which is displayed at the altar.

Few Americans are well-acquainted with the gallantry and heroic exploits of Philadelphia's Irish-born naval commander, Commodore John Barry. Obscured by his contemporary, naval commander John Paul Jones, Barry remains to this day an unsung hero of the young American Republic. In placing Barry at the head of the Navy, George Washington stated he had special trust and confidence in "patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities." Washington named Barry the ranking officer of the Navy granting him commission number one.

Fearless in battle, he was humane to his men as well as adversaries and prisoners. As most naval historians note, Barry can be classed on a par with Jones for nautical skill and daring, but he exceeds him in the length of service (17 years), fidelity to his adopted country and to the nurturing of a permanent American Navy. The esteem in which Barry held by his contemporaries can be summarized by the words of his close friend and eulogist, signer of the Declaration of Independence, Doctor Benjamin Rush who wrote: "He fought often and once bled in the cause of freedom, but his habits of war did not lessen in him the peaceful virtues which adorn private life."

Two hundred nineteen years ago today, September 13, 1803, Commodore John Barry died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at 58 years of age. In the space of 58 years, this son of a poor Irish farmer, from Co. Wexford, rose from a humble cabin boy to senior commander of the entire United States fleet.