

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 33  
Number 4 *July-August*

Article 23

---

1980

### "Night on Fire: The First Complete Account of John Paul Jones' Greatest Battle," and "We Have Met the Enemy: Oliver Hazard Perry: Wilderness Commodore"

James C. Bradford

John Evangelist Walsh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bradford, James C. and Walsh, John Evangelist (1980) ""Night on Fire: The First Complete Account of John Paul Jones' Greatest Battle," and "We Have Met the Enemy: Oliver Hazard Perry: Wilderness Commodore"," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 33 : No. 4 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol33/iss4/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## PROFESSIONAL READING 123

of recent topical works is of definite assistance to both the professional and occasional researcher.

From its inception nearly a decade and a half ago, the *Yearbook* series has maintained an outstanding reputation as a thoroughly researched and clearly written appraisal of current communist affairs. The present edition is no exception and, with recent international trends and events as likely indicators for the 1980s, it is a uniquely valuable reference to better measure the probable change and continuity that will occur throughout the communist world in the decade ahead.

JOSEPH E. THACH, JR.  
OASD(PA)

Walsh, John Evangelist. *Night on Fire: The First Complete Account of John Paul Jones' Greatest Battle*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978. 185pp.

Dillon, Richard. *We Have Met the Enemy: Oliver Hazard Perry: Wilderness Commodore*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978. 231pp.

John Paul Jones and Oliver Hazard Perry are the outstanding American naval heroes of the Age of Sail. Jones' "I have not yet begun to fight" and Perry's "We have met the enemy and they are ours" epitomize the spirit of America and its fledgling Navy in their conflicts with Great Britain, then the "Sovereign of the Seas."

The reputations of both men rest largely on single battles. Off Flamborough Head Jones fought what is widely regarded as the most closely engaged and savage single-ship battle of the Age of Sail, while at Put-in-Bay Perry achieved a historically decisive victory. The story of each is well known, but certainly each bears further attention. Both commanders and their battles are well served by these new, popular histories.

In *Night on Fire*, Reader's Digest editor John Evangelist Walsh focuses

narrowly on the battle between *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis*, beginning with the morning of the engagement and closing with the sinking of *Richard* a day and a half afterward. In just under 100 pages he recounts in minute detail the ships' early maneuvering, their combat, and the immediate aftermath of battle. Walsh has studied all available sources and weaves them together to produce a vivid narrative of courage, death, and ultimate victory. He rightly stresses the critical importance of the men in the tops and Jones' wise decision to delay boarding *Serapis* until its tops and upper deck had been cleared of opposition. Walsh is equitable in his analysis of the controversial men involved. He is kinder to Pierre Landais and Richard Pearson than either Samuel Eliot Morison or Alfred Thayer Mahan without in any way disparaging Jones.

A series of diagrams make clear the complicated maneuvering of the ships and a final chapter analyzes the significance of the engagement. Appendixes list the dead and wounded on both sides and give helpful assessments of pertinent source materials. The result is the fullest, clearest, and most graphic account of what Admiral Morison has called a naval battle "the like of which has never been fought before or since."

Oliver Hazard Perry has not received the attention from either historians or novelists that has been accorded Jones though Richard Dillon believes he merits it. To Dillon, Perry is not just "the most important naval hero of 1812-13" and more deserving of "recall than the other worthies of his day," but "the true hero-patriot" and the man who "changed our history, our fare." With *We Have Met the Enemy*, Dillon, a San Francisco librarian, hopes to rescue Perry from "years of neglect by historians and controversy by biographers." As the author of more than a

## 124 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

dozen popular books about Western Americana, Dillon has increased the fame of such characters as Grizzly Adams and will probably do so for Perry with his work. Unfortunately, he adds little to our understanding of Perry or such of his rivals as Isaac Chauncey and Jesse Elliott.

Dillon depicts young Perry's service in the Caribbean with his father and in the Mediterranean during the Barbary wars as inculcating in him the qualities that guided his actions on Lake Erie. Yet he passes quickly over the equally important experience Perry gained in directing the construction of gunboats in New England from 1807 to 1809. The heart of this book, like Walsh's, is its battle narrative. Dillon recounts Perry's problems in fitting out the fleet saying such things as "only one of [his] smiths was worth a damn . . ." and referring to Isaac Chauncey as Perry's "dilly-dallying commander." The battle itself is fully described but Dillon avoids any real analysis. In the opening round, Perry in *Lawrence* engaged the enemy virtually alone until the ship was disabled and almost all of its crew were casualties. Perry then transferred his flag to *Niagara* "and in just seven minutes of the most brilliant seamanship, tactics, and gunnery in the history of the Navy . . . annihilated a British fleet." In these few minutes Perry, according to Dillon, "saved" the Northwest and made it possible for America to begin "a

permanent policy of westward expansion." The remainder of Perry's life was anticlimactic and Dillon recounts it briefly in the same eulogistic fashion with which he characterizes Perry's earlier years.

Dillon's view of Perry as the savior of the West is not new but, like his style, reflects the 19th-century style of W.W. Dobbins and Alexander Sliddell Mackenzie, the two Perry biographers on whom he relies for much of his information. Dillon's reproduction of long stretches of dialogue without footnote citation or even a bibliography is unsettling to a serious historian and contrasts unfavorably with the meticulous scholarship of John Walsh.

Perry and Jones had a great deal in common. Both men fought against heavy odds made worse by their subordinates' failure to support them. Each showed cool courage under fire, refusing to admit defeat, until he emerged victorious. Both of their victories came at times when American morale was low and by their nature lifted the spirits of their countrymen. Walsh and Dillon have written exciting accounts of these, their subjects' finest hours. Walsh has the added distinction of expanding our knowledge and understanding of both an important battle and the leading characters involved.

JAMES C. BRADFORD  
U.S. Naval Academy