

Red Water by Robert J. Collins



© 2009 Jupiter Images Corporation

Red Water

Captain Norman Jones felt the spray of the sea and the brisk Atlantic winds as he strolled aft to the quarter deck of his ship, the H.M.S. Avenger. His ship was not large, only a 32 gun frigate. He was originally stationed near Spain as part of a blockade to cut off supplies, but now he was on his way to Plymouth where he was to be temporarily stationed.

As he reached the quarter deck and pulled out his spy glass he could just make out the shore of the south coast of England on the horizon. He swiftly stowed his spy glass and barked at his first lieutenant, “Alter course to north by nor’ west Mr. Hanson.” “Aye-Aye sir,” he quickly responded, with a hint of excitement about his voice. Hanson must have been eager to get home, perhaps to see family, but

there was no time to ponder that. There was still much work to be done if they were to arrive at Plymouth, and special care must be taken. After all, they were not in English waters yet, in fact, until they were under the protection of the channel fleet, they were in French territory as well as English territory. As Hanson belted out orders and the hands sprang into position, Jones caught something else in his spy glass.

“Very likely to be a friendly sir,” said the young lieutenant Kingsley, “With the channel fleet near by, I doubt a French vessel would wander out here.” Perhaps Kingsley was right, but an experienced sailor like Captain Jones knew not to assume anything about an approaching vessel.

The ship came closer still, now in sight range. “It’s French sir, the Liberté.” said the signal reader. Captain Jones knew the name well, a large, 44 gun frigate that had seen many victories in the Mediterranean. The frigate was approaching the Avenger from the direction she was headed. That meant Jones had two options. Fight a frigate much bigger than his own, or head east which would mean heading towards France and more danger. Time was waning fast, Jones had to move fast if he wanted to survive. “Round her to the starboard tack Mr. Hanson, loose the top gallants and the mizzen topsails, carry every sail we have!” yelled Jones. “We’re running sir?” “Not quite Mr. Hanson” “She’s gaining sir, six cable lengths at best.” reported Kingsley. Now was the time. “Hanson call the hands to action stations, make ready the guns on the port side but don’t run them out ‘till I give the order!” “Yes sir.” Hanson said obediently, yet obviously confused. If they acted soon they could tack to port and, seeing as the Liberté was

bigger, she could not tack as quickly. Therefore, giving Jones the opportunity to run out the port guns and open fire on a confused and unprepared enemy. “Tack to port Mr. Hanson!” “Aye-aye sir!” said Hanson. They were turning, and the enemy was doing the same at a much slower rate. “Run out the guns and open fire!” Jones yelled with energy. The guns fired almost simultaneously, some of the cannon balls going into the hull of the French ship. The French crew was bewildered and confused, the French captain still yelling orders. The guns fired a second time and the mainmast of the French frigate came crashing down like a great tree during a hurricane. The ship was in utter shambles and unable to retaliate quickly. “Run in the guns and set course west by nor’ west Mr. Hanson, we’re going home.” Those were the proud words of Captain Norman Jones as he sailed back to England in search of calmness and absence of adventure for once in his life.

Jones did not have much family; his mother had died just that year, and his father had died many years ago in The Navy. The only family Jones would see when he went home was his wife and their son. As his carriage arrived at the house where he was staying, family was not the only thing in his mind. “When, and where am I going to be assigned? Will I be reassigned to a new ship?” Those were the questions floating around in Jones’ mind. That night he was nearly sleepless. Jones was very curious about what awaited him in the future, or even the next morning.

Suddenly he became aware of loud footsteps on the street. He checked his watch; It was only four o’ clock in the morning. He quickly jumped out of bed and put on his clothes and pea jacket. Then came a

knock. As he briskly walked down the stairs he overheard the landlady opening the door. Then a very disciplined voice rang out from the door, “Letters for a Captain Jones Ma’am.” “It’s very early in the morning,” said the kindly, yet rather disturbed landlady. “I understand Ma’am but the letters are urgent, and must be delivered immediately.” “Could I just hold them until he comes down for breakfast?” “Absolutely not, these letters are naval business, I must ask you to stand aside, I need to get these...” The messenger was cut off by Jones now in the entrance hall with them. “That won’t be necessary,” stated Jones. “Very well sir, these are for you. I must be on my way.” As the messenger left and the landlady grumpily walked back to her bedroom, Jones went up stairs to read the letters.

Captain N. Jones, you are hereby required by Rear Admiral Parker to, upon receiving these letters, immediately sail H.M.S. Avenger to join the retrieval squadron which is located just off the channel fleet. The squadron is to immediately sail near Trafalgar in order to eliminate a Spanish supply convoy. Details will be aboard the Avenger. Your obedient servant, Rear Admiral John Parker.

Jones knew that usually when you receive a letter from an Admiral that it was to be acted upon immediately. However, in this case Jones decided it best to wait until six o’ clock to rouse the crew. After all, tomorrow was going to be a very long and tiring day. Jones removed his pea jacket, got in bed, and quietly fell asleep, he could do so, for now he knew what was awaiting him the next day.

The pipes of the boatswains mates rang as Captain Jones came aboard the H.M.S Avenger. “All hands on deck, set her to slack water Mr. Hanson!” Jones shouted freshly, feeling more awake than usual. “Hands to the braces, loose main topsails and for’ ard staysail!”

As the hands scurried up the ratlines, Jones couldn't help thinking that they were headed for even more adventure. Jones was an adventurous man, but a man can only take so much adventure.

They were now rounding to the exit of the port. And there was the English Channel, across which was the most hated enemy of all, France. The French had not only caused problems for Jones' country, but also Jones himself. More than half of the threatening enemies he had fought in The Navy were French. Even when he was a young Midshipman, a French vessel engaged the ship, and almost cost Jones his life. He will never forget the French vessel he fought then, nor will he forget the one he fought just six days ago.

Two days later they were nearing the retrieval squadrons last known position, which he had read in the further orders that Rear Admiral Parker had sent him. They had past many of the Ships of the Line that make up the channel fleet, and were nearing the center of it where Admiral Lord Cornwallis was, and hopefully where Parker was. "There's another triple-decker sir," said Kingsley. "137 sir, that's the Tonnant!" shouted the signal reader. Cornwallis' flagship, they were close. They approached another ship riding at anchor, most likely part of the channel fleet. "265 sir, the Indefatigable." "What's the Indefatigable doing out here? It's too small to be a part of the channel fleet." Jones thought. His question was immediately answered. "281 sir, the Trinity, that's Parker!" the signal reader shouted excitedly. "The Indefatigable must be part of the squadron," Jones thought. He quickly ordered, "Send the message: Avenger to flag, ready to join squadron, Mr. Dawson." "Aye-aye sir," responded Mr. Dawson, the signal reader.

“Flag acknowledges sir.” “Hands to the braces, loose the mizzen topsail, ready at the helm!” shouted Jones. They were now going to join the squadron. “Flag to general sir, hands to dinner.” “Very well Mr. Dawson, acknowledge.”

They were now nearing Trafalgar with the retrieval squadron. The week that went by since Avenger joined the squadron seemed like a month. With nothing to do around the ship except run drills, along with the unfavorable wind, each day felt like many. However, they were now in line formation, making a net in order to catch the convoy. From their position, Jones could see two ships of the squadron, the Indefatigable and the Medusa. If they were to see anything, they would send a signal to Medusa who would relay the signal down the line until it reached the Trinity.

Jones was in his cabin writing letters to his wife, when Mr. Kingsley ran in the door. “Sir we’ve sighted sails off the starboard bow!” Kingsley shouted. “Have you signaled Medusa?!” Jones asked, aroused with the possibility of seeing action. “Yes sir.” Jones walked up to the quarterdeck and looked through his spyglass. “It’s too early to decipher if it’s an enemy or the convoy,” stated Jones, “All we can do at the moment is wait.” Suddenly the signal reader seemed intrigued. “What is it Mr. Dawson,” said Hanson, who had just entered the quarter deck after being roused from his cabin. “Medusa is signaling sir, she must be relaying the flag.” “Well, what is it then?!” said the impatient Kingsley. “Flag to squadron, be on alert. Flag to squadron left, tack to starboard in three minutes,” reported Dawson. Parker was obviously preempting a net around the incoming ship, just in case it was the

convoy. The ship was now entering the range at which one could tell its nationality. "Sir...it...it's a Spanish triple-decker!" stammered Dawson. "Hands to action stations, Mr. Dawson signal Medusa that we have sighted a Spanish target. Mr. Kingsley, get to the gun deck and await further orders!" barked Jones. "Sir, Medusa is relaying: Flag to squadron, hands to action stations, await further orders," Dawson shouted. The vessel was getting nearer, more sails were visible on the horizon. "It must be the convoy," Jones thought excitedly. Parker and the left squadron were barely visible now, enclosing a square around the vessels. "Medusa is relaying sir!" Dawson shouted barley retaining his excitement, "Flag to squadron, convoy in sight. Avenger, Indefatigable, and Medusa take lead. Remaining squadron attack side ships. Convoy ships are not to be sunk." That was it. That was the order. "Hands ready and cleared for action sir," reported Hanson. "Hands to the braces, tack to starboard, run out the guns on the port side!!!" Jones yelled. As the three ships sprung into action, the left squadron became clearly visible as they neared the convoy. The lead ship was immediately aware of the approaching ships and, from the quarterdeck of the Avenger, Jones saw the deck explode as the captain was shouting orders. "Run out the guns on the port side, make ready to fire!" shouted Jones. They were going to come up on her port side, the Indefatigable was going to come up to her bow, and the Medusa was going to come up on her starboard.

As the ships came closer, the Spanish ship ran out her guns on both sides. The Indefatigable was now engaging the ship from the front, as the other two ships came up on her. As both the *Avenger* and the *Medusa* came into place, there was a half-second of stillness. Then

Jones shouted, “FIIIRREEE!!!” and as the ship’s fired Jones witnessed the port gun deck take a huge beating, all the crewmen were taken aback and disorganized. Jones ordered his men to fire again. This time, many holes in the gun deck were visible, and as Jones looked up he himself was taken aback as the huge mainmast of the Medusa fell into the water. The deck was riddled with bodies, the hull was obliterated. Jones’ crew began to board the ship and the flag was signaling victory. All of the men were celebrating, all but one. Jones was staring at the Medusa as she sank, and it was then, when no one else was looking, that Jones showed a piece of humanity in him. For under the hull of the Medusa there was a sight he had never witnessed. Red water.