

= Action of 5 May 1794 =

The Action of 5 May 1794 was a minor naval engagement fought in the Indian Ocean during the French Revolutionary Wars . A British squadron had been blockading the French island of Isle de France (now Mauritius) since early in the year , and early on 5 May discovered two ships approaching their position . As the strange vessels came closer , they were recognised as the French frigate Duguay Trouin , which had been captured from the East India Company the year before , and a small brig . Making use of a favourable wind , the British squadron gave chase to the new arrivals , which fled . The chase was short , as Duguay Trouin was a poor sailor with many of the crew sick and unable to report for duty . The British frigate HMS Orpheus was the first to arrive , and soon completely disabled the French frigate , successfully raking the wallowing ship . After an hour and twenty minutes the French captain surrendered , Captain Henry Newcome of Orpheus taking over the captured ship and bringing his prize back to port in India .

= = Background = =

Britain joined the French Revolutionary Wars in February 1793 , but the news did not reach the Indian Ocean for four months . The immediate priority of the British squadron under Commodore William Cornwallis in British India was the capture of the French colonies in India , especially their main port of Pondicherry . Once the British had completed this operation at the end of August 1793 , the squadron returned to Europe . This left British commerce in Eastern waters badly exposed , and privateers and warships operating from Isle de France captured a number of merchant vessels , including the large East Indiaman Princess Royal , which three privateer corvettes seized on 27 September in the Sunda Strait .

Princess Royal was a well armed ship , carrying twenty six 12 pounder cannon and a number of smaller calibre guns on the maindeck . The French Navy immediately took her into service as the 34 gun frigate Duguay Trouin and attached her to the Isle de France squadron of the frigates Prudente and Cybèle , and the brig Vulcain under Captain Jean Marie Renaud . This force skirmished inconclusively with a squadron of East India Company ships in the Sunda Strait in January 1794 , before returning to Isle de France with the captured East Indiaman Pigot .

By the early spring of 1794 , three vessels had come out from Britain - 32 gun frigate HMS Orpheus under Captain Henry Newcome , the 50 gun fifth rate HMS Centurion under Captain Samuel Osbourne , and the 44 gun HMS Resistance under Captain Edward Pakenham to replace Cornwallis 's squadron . These ships passed the French bases on Isle de France en route to India , and briefly blockaded the port with some success against French merchant vessels : Orpheus alone sent three officers and twenty men to India in captured merchant ships . The French too had ships at sea during this period , Duguay Trouin and Vulcain cruising together in the Indian Ocean during the spring before returning to Isle de France .

= = Battle = =

As the French vessels approached the island on 5 May they were sighted by lookouts on the British squadron . The British captains then waited for the French to get closer , launching a chase in the mid morning when they held the weather gage so that the wind was behind them . This allowed them to rapidly close with the French vessels whose efforts to escape were hampered by Duguay Trouin 's poor sailing qualities . At 11 : 45 , Orpheus was the first to reach the French frigate , firing on Duguay Trouin from long range . Within ten minutes the British ship had pulled closer to the former East Indiaman and although Duguay Trouin briefly returned fire , Orpheus was soon positioned across the starboard quarter of the French ship , allowing Newcome to pour raking fire into the Duguay Trouin without reply .

By 13 : 15 , Duguay Trouin was a battered wreck , with the hull significantly damaged , the bowsprit shot away and heavy casualties among the crew . With his ship unmanageable and Centurion and Resistance now 3 nautical miles (5 @ 6 km) away and approaching rapidly , the French captain

struck his colours and surrendered . The brig Vulcain had taken the opportunity to escape as Duguay Trouin and Orpheus fought and later reached Isle de France . Newcome lost one midshipman killed and one officer and eight men wounded in the exchange from a crew of 194 . Losses on Duguay Trouin were far more severe : the French ship recorded 21 men killed and 60 wounded from a nominal complement of 403 .

= = Aftermath = =

Newcome initially took his prize to Mahé in the Seychelles , where he demanded fresh supplies , particularly water , for his prisoners . The French governors of the islands refused , and Newcome stormed and seized the town , taking all of the supplies and military stores . The wounded and sick prisoners were disembarked , and the contents of a small French brig were turned over to the inhabitants to replace the seized supplies . Newcome then returned to India with his prize , but the ship was not subsequently purchased by the Royal Navy .

Historical reaction to the battle has focused on the significantly stronger British position in the encounter , with three large regular warships pitted against a hastily converted merchant vessel with a significant proportion of the crew suffering from illness . Duguay Trouin was also weakly built and weakly armed : early estimates that the Duguay Trouin 's main battery mounted twenty six 18 pounder long guns were revised to 12 pounders with eight smaller cannon on the upper deck . The British blockade of Isle de France continued throughout the year , with Centurion engaged in an inconclusive action against a French squadron in October . Although Isle de France remained in French hands throughout the conflict , the Indian Ocean was largely under British control by 1796 .