

= Macau Incident (1799) =

The Macau Incident was an inconclusive encounter between a powerful squadron of French and Spanish warships and a British Royal Navy escort squadron in the Wanshan Archipelago (or Ladrones Archipelago) off Macau on 27 January 1799 . The incident took place in the context of the East Indies campaign of the French Revolutionary Wars , the allied squadron attempting to disrupt a valuable British merchant convoy due to sail from Qing Dynasty China . This was the second such attempt in three years ; at the Bali Strait Incident of 1797 a French frigate squadron had been driven off during an attack on that year 's China convoy . By early 1799 the French squadron had dispersed , with two remaining ships deployed to the Spanish Philippines . There the frigates had united with the Spanish Manila squadron and sailed to attack the British China convoy gathering at Macau .

The British commander in the East Indies , Rear @-@ Admiral Peter Rainier was concerned about the vulnerability of the China convoy and sent reinforcements to support the lone Royal Navy escort , the ship of the line HMS Intrepid under Captain William Hargood . These reinforcements arrived on 21 January , only six days before the allied squadron arrived off Macau . Hargood sailed to meet the French and Spanish ships , and a chase ensued through the Wanshan Archipelago before contact was lost . Both sides subsequently claimed that the other had refused battle , although it was the allied squadron which withdrew , Hargood later successfully escorting the China convoy safely westwards .

= = Background = =

The East Indian trade was an essential component of the economy of Great Britain in the eighteenth century . Administered by the East India Company from British India , exotic trade goods were carried on large well @-@ armed merchant ships known as East Indiamen , which weighed between 500 and 1 @,@ 200 long tons (510 and 1 @,@ 220 t) . Among the most valuable parts of the East India trade was an annual convoy from Macau , a Portuguese port in Qing Dynasty China . Early each year , a large convoy of East Indiamen would assemble at Macau in preparation for their six @-@ month journey across the Indian Ocean and through the Atlantic to Britain . The value of the trade carried in this convoy , nicknamed the " China Fleet " , was enormous : one convoy in 1804 was reported to be carrying goods worth over £ 8 million in contemporary values (the equivalent of £ 600 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 as of 2016) .

British interests in the East Indies were protected by a large but scattered Royal Navy squadron under the overall command of Rear @-@ Admiral Peter Rainier . By 1799 , Rainier 's command covered many thousands of square miles of ocean , including the strategically important ports of British India , Bombay , Madras and Calcutta and the coast of British Ceylon , as well as bases in the Red Sea , at Penang and in the Dutch East Indies . He also had to maintain a watch on hostile warships , particularly a French force at the remote island base of Île de France (now Mauritius) , the Dutch at Batavia (now Djakarta) and the Spanish at Manila . The French had been the greatest threat , with a powerful squadron assembled in 1796 under Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey menacing British shipping in the East Indies in 1796 and 1797 . On 28 January 1797 , Sercey 's force intercepted that year 's unescorted China Fleet in the Bali Strait , and in the ensuing Bali Strait Incident only quick thinking by the commodore , imitating Royal Navy warships in poor visibility , dissuaded Sercey from pressing his attack .

Sercey 's force had subsequently broken up as it proved too expensive to maintain as a cohesive force . By late 1798 , Sercey was at anchor in Batavia with only two vessels , the 20 @-@ gun corvette Brûle @-@ Gueule and the 40 @-@ gun frigate Preneuse , which had arrived in Batavia from a diplomatic mission to the Kingdom of Mysore in a state of near @-@ mutiny ; Captain Jean @-@ Matthieu @-@ Adrien Lhermitte had been forced to execute five men for disobedience en route . Sercey also learned that two additional frigates , Forte and Prudente would not be joining him : his orders had been countermanded by Governor Malartic on Île de France and these frigates were now cruising independently against British trade in the Indian Ocean . Sercey decided to augment his forces by uniting them with the allied Spanish squadron at Manila in the Spanish Philippines , his

frigates arriving on 16 October 1798 , although the admiral remained at Surabaya . The Spanish squadron had been severely damaged in a typhoon of April 1797 and repairs had taken nearly two years : when British frigates raided Manila in January 1798 not one Spanish ship was in a condition to oppose them .

= = Incident at Macau = =

News of the junction of the French and Spanish squadrons reached Rainier soon afterwards . With the assembling merchant ships at Macau were the frigates HMS Fox and HMS Carysfort and the 64 @-@ gun ship of the line HMS Intrepid , the escort commanded by Captain William Hargood . However Fox and Carysfort were detached with a local convoy in November 1798 , and Rainier , whose forces were largely committed to the Red Sea following the recent French invasion of Egypt , gave urgent orders for the frigates to be replaced by the 38 @-@ gun HMS Virginie and 74 @-@ gun HMS Arrogant . The reinforcements sailed through the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea , arriving at Macau on 21 January 1799 .

The Franco @-@ Spanish squadron , comprising the 74 @-@ gun ships of the line Europa and Montañés , and the frigates Maria de la Cabeza and Luisa , accompanied by Preneuse and Brûle @-@ Gueule , sailed from Manila on 6 January 1799 , under the command of Rear @-@ Admiral Ignacio Maria de Álava . Alava 's squadron crossed the South China Sea in three weeks , arriving in the Wanshan Archipelago near Macau on 27 January 1799 with the intention of attacking shipping at Macau and in the mouth of the Pearl River . Alava had been informed of the presence of Intrepid by Danish merchants but was unaware of the arrival of Rainier 's reinforcements .

Hargood immediately sailed to confront Alava , both squadrons initially forming lines of battle and steering towards one another , Virginie at the head of the British line . What followed has been the subject of dispute . Hargood reported that the Franco @-@ Spanish squadron then turned and fled into the Wanshan Archipelago , where they anchored as darkness fell before withdrawing before dawn . He ascribes this to " their dread of a conflict that would in all probability have terminated in their disgrace " . Alava however reported in the Manila Gazette that it was Hargood who had retreated into the Wanshan Archipelago , pursued closely by Europa . Alava claimed that he would have pressed the attack but for damage to the rigging on Montañés that allowed Hargood to escape . He does not explain why his squadron then subsequently withdrew without attacking the apparently unprotected assembled China Fleet anchored in Macau .

= = Aftermath = =

In historian C. Northcote Parkinson 's assessment " It is perhaps fair to conclude that neither squadron was spoiling for a fight " , although he describes Lhermitte 's subsequent reaction as " disgust " and Sercey 's as " fury " . Richard Woodman considered that by this action the French threw " away at a stroke the chance not only of seizing a valuable convoy , but of establishing Franco @-@ Spanish dominance in Indo @-@ Chinese waters " . Alava retired to Manila , the French ships departing for Batavia and subsequently returning to Île de France . There Preneuse was intercepted at the Action of 11 December 1799 by a blockade squadron made up of HMS Tremendous and HMS Adamant , driven on shore and destroyed . Sercey subsequently returned to France , retired from the French Navy and became a planter on Île de France .

Hargood sailed from Macau with the China Fleet on 7 February , passing unimpeded into the Indian Ocean . Alava did belatedly send Europa and frigate Fama back to Macau in May , but this achieved nothing . Rainier ensured that the 1800 China Fleet was well defended , but no further attacks were made on British shipping from China before the Peace of Amiens in 1802 . Early in the Napoleonic Wars , in 1804 , a powerful French squadron attacked the China Fleet at the Battle of Pulo Aura , but the East Indiamen succeeded in bluffing the French into withdrawing after a brief exchange of fire .