

= USS Constellation vs La Vengeance =

The USS Constellation vs La Vengeance , or the Action of 1 February 1800 , was a single @-@ ship action fought between frigates of the French Navy and the United States Navy during the Quasi @-@ War . The battle resulted in the American frigate USS Constellation severely damaging the French frigate La Vengeance and forcing her to flee .

In 1798 , an undeclared war had begun between the United States and France due to French seizures of American merchantmen . As part of an American effort to deter French attacks , Commodore Thomas Truxton led an American naval squadron that was dispatched to the Lesser Antilles . Learning that regular French naval forces were in the region , Truxton set out in his flagship Constellation and sailed to Guadeloupe to engage them . On 1 February 1800 , while nearing the French colony , Constellation met François Marie Pitot 's frigate La Vengeance of the French Navy . Despite Pitot 's attempts to flee , his frigate was drawn into a heavy engagement with Constellation . Although the French frigate struck her colors (surrendered) twice , Constellation was unable to take La Vengeance as a prize . Eventually Pitot was able to escape with his frigate to Curaçao , though only after sustaining severe casualties and damage to his vessel . Truxton 's ship sustained light damage and sailed to Jamaica for repairs before returning home to a hero 's welcome .

= = Background = =

In 1800 , the Quasi @-@ War between the United States and France was in full force . In order to prevent French attacks against American merchantmen in the Caribbean , the United States Navy maintained four squadrons of vessels in the region . One such squadron was commanded by Commodore Thomas Truxton , and tasked with patrolling the Lesser Antilles . Taking command on 19 January 1800 after arriving at Saint Kitts in his flagship USS Constellation , Truxton 's squadron consisted of four frigates , three schooners , and a ship @-@ rigged man of war . Besides the numerous privateers operating in the area , the only French naval forces in Truxton 's area of operations were the frigate La Vengeance under François Marie Pitot and the corvette La Berceau under Louis Senes . Both vessels had arrived at Guadeloupe on 10 December 1799 escorting the new administrators of the French colony . Once at Saint Kitts Truxton dispersed his squadron , giving each ship orders to cruise independently . He then set sail for Guadeloupe on 30 January 1800 with his flagship Constellation , intending to challenge the French frigate and corvette there . The same day , Pitot in La Vengeance left Guadeloupe 's capital of Basse @-@ Terre for France .

By this point in the Quasi @-@ War , the 1 @,@ 265 @-@ ton Constellation carried 38 cannon despite officially being classified by the United States Navy as a 36 @-@ gun frigate . Previously her armament had consisted of 24 @-@ pounder guns , but these had proven inefficient during Truxton 's action with L 'Insurgente and as a result were removed and replaced with twenty @-@ eight 18 @-@ pounder cannon and ten 24 @-@ pounder carronades . Truxton and his crew were hardened veterans and were well prepared for a fight . Their French counterparts were not as ready for an engagement . Pitot 's frigate was carrying a large quantity of specie as well as 36 American prisoners of war and 80 passengers , two of whom were generals . Under such circumstances Pitot intended to avoid an engagement if possible , even though La Vengeance was a more heavily armed vessel carrying eight 42 @-@ pounder carronades , twenty @-@ eight 18 @-@ pounders , and sixteen 12 @-@ pounder cannon . The French also had a distinct advantage in the event of a boarding action , as Constellation had only 310 men to La Vengeance 's complement of 380 crew .

= = Engagement = =

On 1 February 1800 at 07 : 00 , Truxton 's crew spotted what appeared to be a 54 @-@ gun frigate flying British colors two leagues off the Basse @-@ Terre roadstead . In an effort to communicate with the mysterious frigate , Constellation flew British colors . Pitot had sighted the American ship by 07 : 45 . Thinking the vessel chasing him was a superior 55 @-@ gun warship , he sought to avoid conflict , and continued to sail with the wind rather than head north as he had originally intended . In

an effort to increase her speed , the French frigate 's crew put out studding sails to catch more wind . The behavior of Pitot 's frigate signaled to Truxton that she was really a French warship , so he ordered Constellation cleared for action and gave chase . By 08 : 00 he struck the British colors and raised the American flag . As he closed with La Vengeance he shouted through a speaking trumpet for the French vessel to surrender .

At this point the action began , with Pitot 's stern chasers opening fire upon Constellation . In an effort to cut the American frigate 's advantage in speed , La Vengeance changed course to the south @-@ east where the wind would give her an advantage . As he maneuvered his vessel , Pitot was able to unleash a broadside aimed at Constellation 's rigging . The American frigate waited to return fire until she 'd gained the weather gage . Now having the advantage of the wind , Truxton 's opening double @-@ shotted broadside slammed into the port side of La Vengeance 's hull . Sailing side by side , the two frigates continued to engage each other for two and a half hours while Truxton attempted unsuccessfully to move his ship into a raking fire position . As the French tended to aim for the rigging , at one point Constellation 's foresails were shot away and the frigate lost her maneuverability until they could be replaced .

La Vengeance prepared for a boarding action when the two frigates drew closer together at 22 : 45 , but this attempt was foiled when Constellation fired broadsides of grapeshot at Pitot 's ship while American marines fired their muskets and hurled grenades down from the rigging . With the French ship drawing off , the two vessels began a longer range round shot duel that lasted until 02 : 00 on 2 February 1800 , when La Vengeance struck her colors for the second time . At some point earlier in the action , Pitot had struck his flag but the Americans did not notice because of darkness . Truxton moved Constellation to within 25 yards (23 m) of his vanquished opponent aiming to take her as a prize . The American commodore 's ambitions were spoiled when at 03 : 00 Constellation 's mainmast fell overboard , killing several topmen who went down with it . With the Americans unable to come alongside his vessel , Pitot took advantage of the situation and simply slipped away into the darkness .

= = Aftermath = =

Casualties were heavy on both sides , and both vessels were in such poor condition that each commander thought he had sunk his opponent . Most of La Vengeance 's rigging had been blown away ; only the lower foremast , lower mizzenmast , and bowsprit were operational . Pitot set course for Curaçao and was forced to ground his vessel there to prevent her from sinking . The number of French casualties is somewhat unclear : official French accounts report 28 dead and 40 wounded , while accounts from Curaçao state that the French frigate had lost 160 men . Once Pitot reached Curaçao he was beset with further problems . La Vengeance remained out of action for months due to difficulties in acquiring support needed to repair the frigate from the Dutch officials there . A French expedition to seize the island brought the materiel needed to repair the frigate , but when asked to help attack the island Pitot refused and slipped away to Guadaloupe .

Constellation had suffered heavy damage with 15 of her crew slain and a further 25 wounded , of whom 11 later died . The ship sailed to Port Royal , Jamaica , for a refit , but Truxton could not complete the necessary repairs because of a shortage of naval stores . The ship left Jamaica a week after she arrived , with only her mainmast replaced . After escorting a convoy of 14 merchantmen back to the United States , Truxton sailed his battered frigate to Hampton Roads for a proper refit . Only after he returned to the United States did the American commodore finally learn that the La Vengeance had not been sunk . Truxton was considered a hero and received considerable praise for his actions . In response to his battle with Pitot 's frigate , the American government commended Truxton with a Congressional Gold Medal depicting the battle . James C. Jarvis , a 13 @-@ year @-@ old Midshipman who was killed when the mainmast collapsed , became famous for his bravery during the battle .