

= Action of 7 May 1794 =

The Action of 7 May 1794 was a minor naval action fought between a British ship of the line and a French frigate early in the French Revolutionary Wars . The French Navy sought to disrupt British trade by intercepting and capturing merchant ships with roving frigates , a strategy countered by protecting British convoys with heavier warships , particularly in European waters . On 5 May 1794 , the British escorts of a convoy from Cork sighted two French ships approaching and gave chase . The ships , a frigate and a corvette , outmatched by their opponents , separated and the convoy escorts did likewise , each following one of the raiders on a separate course .

By the evening one of the French ships had successfully escaped , but the other was still under pursuit , Captain Charles Linois of *Atalante* attempting a number of tactics to drive off his opponent but without success . Eventually , after a chase lasting nearly two days , the French ship came within range of the much larger British 74 @-@ gun third rate *HMS Swiftsure* and despite a brave defence was soon forced to surrender after suffering more than 40 casualties . Although he had surrendered his ship , Linois was widely praised for his actions in defending his ship against such heavy odds .

In the aftermath of the engagement , a French battle squadron that formed part of the developing Atlantic campaign of May 1794 pursued both ships for the rest of the day ; their quarry eventually escaped after dark . *Atalante* was later taken into the Royal Navy as *HMS Espion* .

= = Background = =

The outbreak of war between Britain and France in the spring of 1793 came at a time of differing fortunes for the navies of the two countries . The Royal Navy had been at a state of heightened readiness since 1792 in preparation for the conflict , while the French Navy had still not recovered from the upheavals of the French Revolution , which had resulted in the collapse of the naval hierarchy and a dearth of experienced officers and seamen . French naval strategy early in the war was to send squadrons and light vessels to operate along British trade routes , in order to disrupt British mercantile operations . This resulted in Britain forming its merchant ships into convoys for mutual protection , escorted by warships while in European waters to defend against roving attacks by French ships .

By the spring of 1794 , France was in turmoil following the failure of the harvest , which threatened the country with starvation . In order to secure food supplies , France turned to its American colonies and the United States , which assembled a large grain convoy in Hampton Roads . To ensure the security of this convoy , the French Navy dispatched most of its Atlantic Fleet to sea during May 1794 , operating in a series of large squadrons , independent cruisers and one major fleet under Villaret de Joyeuse . On 5 May , two French ships operating independently , the 36 @-@ gun frigate *Atalante* under Captain Charles Linois and the corvette *Levrette* , spied a British convoy sailing south @-@ west , three days out from Cork , and closed to investigate .

= = Pursuit = =

The convoy that Linois had sighted was under the protection of two ships of the line , the *Swiftsure* under Captain Charles Boyles and the 64 @-@ gun *HMS St Albans* under Captain James Vashon . At 17 : 45 , with the French frigates closing from the west and aware that they could not defend the whole convoy without immediate direct action , Boyles turned *Swiftsure* and *St Albans* towards the newcomers , hoisting their colours and *Swiftsure* firing three shots in the direction of the larger ship , *Atalante* . Together the British ships hugely outweighed and outmatched the French vessels , and as soon as Linois realised his mistake he gave orders for his ships to turn and make all sail to escape pursuit , raising the French tricolour and firing his stern @-@ chasers , guns fitted in the rear of the ship , at his pursuers .

The French ships immediately separated . *St Albans* then followed *Levrette* while *Swiftsure* concentrated on *Atalante* . Throughout the rest of the evening the two chases continued . Then after

darkness fell Levrette was able to outrun and escape from St Albans . Swiftsure however remained in touch with Atalante so that by 04 : 00 on 6 May the French frigate was approximately 2 @.@ 5 nautical miles (4 @.@ 6 km) ahead of the ship of the line to the northwest , with the wind direction to the north @-@ northeast . For the entire following day Linois could not escape Boyles ' pursuit , and at 17 : 30 Swiftsure was close enough to open fire again , using the bow @-@ chasers for an hour and a half until Atalante once more pulled out of range . During the evening the French frigate was able to keep 2 nautical miles (3 @.@ 7 km) in front of Swiftsure , but at midnight Linois switched his course to the south , hoping that the darkness would cloak the manoeuvre and that Atlante would be able to escape Boyles .

At 02 : 00 it became clear that Linois 's ploy had failed and that Swiftsure was still following Atalante . More importantly , the manoeuvre had severely slowed the frigate . Although Linois hauled closer to the wind , Boyles was able to come within range at 02 : 30 , firing his starboard guns into the smaller ship . Although his crew were exhausted by the extended chase Linois returned fire , the warships exchanging shot at long @-@ range and the frigate suffering far more serious damage during the brief engagement . By 03 : 25 Linois was forced to surrender , his ship 's rigging in tatters and casualties mounting among his crew . Boyles then provided a prize crew to the frigate and took most of the surviving French crew aboard his own ship as prisoners of war . Casualties on the French ship were heavy , with ten killed and 32 wounded from the 274 men aboard , compared to a single man lost on Swiftsure , which had also suffered some damage to its rigging .

= = Aftermath = =

Boyles was not long able to enjoy his victory undisturbed : at 10 : 00 on 7 May , shortly after the removal of the French prisoners had been completed , sails were spotted on the horizon . These were rapidly identified as three French ships of the line that were making all haste to intercept and capture Swiftsure and Atalante . These ships were part of a squadron under Contre @-@ Admiral Joseph @-@ Marie Nielly that had sailed from Rochefort the day before in search of the American grain convoy shortly due in European waters . Issuing rapid orders , Boyles instructed Atalante 's prize crew to separate their ship from Swiftsure in order to force the French to split their forces ; the frigate and the ship of the line fleeing on different courses . Atalante soon outran pursuit and escaped into the Atlantic , the prize crew even managing to replace the damaged main topsail in the midst of the chase with the assistance of the French prisoners on board . Swiftsure was slower but Boyles was still able to increase the distance between his vessel and the French during the day , finally losing sight of his pursuers at 22 : 00 .

Both ships arrived safely at Cork on 17 May , Rear @-@ Admiral Robert Kingsmill informing the Admiralty of the action by letter . Atalante subsequently served the Royal Navy as a 36 @-@ gun frigate under the name HMS Espion as there was already a ship named HMS Atalanta in service . For his lengthy and brave resistance , Linois was highly praised , particularly by the historian William James , who wrote in 1827 that Linois ' " endeavours . . . were highly meritorious " and considered that in an engagement against a British frigate " the Atalante , if conquered at all , would have been dearly purchased . " Shortly after his arrival in Britain , Linois was exchanged and returned to France .