

= Battle of Port Louis =

The Battle of Port Louis was a minor naval engagement of the French Revolutionary Wars , fought on 11 December 1799 at the mouth of the Tombeau River near Port Louis on the French Indian Ocean island of Île de France , later known as Mauritius . Preneuse had originally been part of a powerful squadron of six frigates sent to the Indian Ocean in 1796 under the command of Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey , but the squadron dispersed in 1798 and by the summer of 1799 Preneuse was the only significant French warship remaining in the region . The battle was the culmination of a three @-@ month raiding cruise by the 40 @-@ gun French Navy frigate Preneuse , commanded by Captain Jean @-@ Matthieu @-@ Adrien Lhermitte . Ordered to raid British commerce in the Mozambique Channel , Lhermitte 's cruise had been eventful , with an inconclusive encounter with a squadron of small British warships in Algoa Bay on 20 September and an engagement with the 50 @-@ gun HMS Jupiter during heavy weather on 9 ? 11 October .

Returning to Île de France in December , Lhermitte steered for Port Louis but was intercepted by the British blockade squadron , comprising the 74 @-@ gun ship of the line HMS Tremendous and the 50 @-@ gun HMS Adamant . Unable to reach safety , Lhermitte evaded pursuit long enough to drive Preneuse onto a beach at the mouth of the Tombeau . After a brief exchange of fire the wrecked frigate was surrendered and British boarding parties in ship 's boats rowed inshore to Preneuse , removed the survivors and burnt the remains . Watching from the shore as the last of his command burned on the beach , Sercey subsequently retired from military service .

= = Background = =

In 1796 British Royal Navy dominance in the East Indies during the French Revolutionary Wars was challenged by the arrival of a squadron of six French Navy frigates , commanded by Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey . Among these ships was the new 40 @-@ gun frigate Preneuse , commanded by Captain Jean @-@ Matthieu @-@ Adrien Lhermitte . Preneuse had not sailed from France with Sercey , instead passing independently through the Atlantic and uniting with the squadron at Port Louis on Île de France . Sercey deployed his squadron to the Dutch East Indies , but suffered frustration at the Action of 9 September 1796 and the Bali Strait Incident of January 1797 and subsequently returned to the base at Port Louis . There the squadron began to fracture , with a succession of ships sent back to France or detached on independent missions .

Preneuse separated in March 1798 , carrying messages of support and 86 military volunteers for the Tipu Sultan of the Kingdom of Mysore , an enemy of the British in Southern India who sought to form an alliance with France . Lhermitte 's instructions emphasised subtlety in the operation , but on 20 April he attacked the British port of Tellicherry and seized the East Indiaman merchant ships Woodcot and Raymond . This alerted the British to Preneuse 's mission and although the reinforcements were landed safely at Mangalore on 24 April , diplomatic relations between the British and Mysore collapsed , leading to the Fourth Anglo @-@ Mysore War the following year in which Tipu Sultan was killed and his kingdom absorbed into British India .

Lhermitte then sailed to rejoin Sercey and the corvette Brûle @-@ Gueule at Batavia in the Dutch East Indies for a planned junction with an allied Spanish squadron at Manila . This combined force then attacked an East India Company convoy gathering in the Pearl River in January 1799 , but in the ensuing Macau Incident they were driven off by the Royal Navy escort squadron . Dispirited , Sercey returned westwards to Île de France , narrowly avoiding an unequal battle with a large British squadron blockading the port . On arrival he discovered that Preneuse and Brûle @-@ Gueule were the only ships remaining of his original command , the others having returned to France or been lost in battle .

= = Battle of Algoa Bay = =

In September 1799 Sercey dispersed his remaining ships . Brûle @-@ Gueule was sent back to France on 26 September carrying condemned political prisoners ; the corvette was eventually

wrecked on the Pointe du Raz with heavy loss of life . Preneuse was ordered to operate against British trade off the coast of Southeast Africa , sailing from Port Louis on 4 August . Lhermitte focused his efforts on the Mozambique Channel and the approaches to the British Cape Colony and on 20 September encountered a squadron anchored in Algoa Bay comprising the 24 @-@ gun naval storeship HMS Camel , the 16 @-@ gun HMS Rattlesnake and the schooner Surprise , the former ships lying with their masts and rigging removed . This force was supporting an expeditionary army under General Francis Dundas fighting the Third Xhosa War . Camel was laden with military supplies but neither ship was prepared for battle , with a 30 of Camel 's sailors and 15 from Rattlesnake trapped on shore by the surf .

Lhermitte approached the anchored ships at 18 : 00 , flying false Danish colours , and anchored nearby . A ship 's boat from Camel approached the new arrival , rapidly realising that Preneuse was a hostile frigate and returning to their ship . Lieutenant William Fothergill , the most senior officer with the convoy , fired warning shots close to the frigate , which Lhermitte ignored . Both British ships then prepared for action . At 20 : 30 , Preneuse began to approach Rattlesnake and Fothergill opened fire immediately , joined by Camel . Lhermitte returned fire , focusing its broadside on Camel . By midnight Camel had taken several shot in the hull causing widespread flooding , and the crew ceased firing to man the pumps . Lhermitte apparently believed that Camel had abandoned the fight and he switched fire towards Rattlesnake , the engagement continuing until 03 : 30 at which point Lhermitte slipped his anchor and pulled out of range . Remaining in the bay until 10 : 00 before standing out to sea . British losses were two killed and twelve wounded , both Camel and Rattlesnake badly damaged . It was later reported in French sources that Lhermitte believed the schooner Surprise to be a well armed naval brig , prompting his withdrawal . Preneuse 's loss in the action was around 40 killed and wounded , and the frigate was reported to be badly damaged ; messages to this effect were hastily sent to the commander at the Cape , Captain George Losack who sent the 50 @-@ gun HMS Jupiter in pursuit .

On 9 October after spending the night with the convoy in Algoa Bay , Jupiter discovered Preneuse at 34 ° 41 ' S 27 ° 54 ' E and gave chase . The sea was turbulent due to a strong gale from the northwest and the chase continued into the evening before Captain William Granger was able to fire ranging shot at the French ship . Lhermitte responded with his sternchasers . Granger rapidly gained on the damaged Preneuse but the state of the sea made it impossible for him to safely open his lower deck gunports and a long @-@ range duel continued at high speed throughout the night and much of the following two days . At 14 : 00 on 10 October Granger was finally close enough to bring Lhermitte to action , but found that with his 24 @-@ pounder guns unusable he was restricted to his upper deck 12 @-@ pounder guns , which were no match for Lhermitte 's main battery . As a result , the rigging on Jupiter was rapidly shot away and the British ship fell back for urgent repairs and Preneuse was able to take the opportunity to escape . Granger returned to Table Bay on 16 October .

= = Chase off Port Louis = =

Lhermitte had little subsequent success , and Preneuse returned to Port Louis in early December 1799 . The entrance to the port was blockaded by the 74 @-@ gun ship of the line HMS Tremendous under Captain John Osborn and the 50 @-@ gun HMS Adamant under Captain William Hotham . These ships had been sent specifically to intercept Preneuse , arriving at Port Louis on 7 December and successfully intercepting the merchant French vessels Benjamin and Bienfait and the Spanish Nuestra Señora del Carmen . Four days later they sighted the approaching frigate and chased it northeast , Adamant pressing so close that Lhermitte could not escape and was forced to drive the frigate on shore at the mouth of the Tombeau River within range of a large shore battery .

At 15 : 00 Lhermitte ordered the masts on Preneuse to be cut away and the frigate and battery then opened fire on Adamant , which was carefully sailing through the coastal shoals in an effort to engage the beached French ship . For more than two hours Hotham 's ship worked its way inshore until at 17 : 30 it was well positioned to open fire , unleashing its broadside on the wrecked

Preneuse . By 17 : 45 it was clear that further resistance was futile and Lhermitte struck his colours . Preneuse had surrendered , but was likely damaged beyond repair .

Hotham and Osborn discussed the situation and determined to destroy the wreck to deny it to the French . To this end , three cutters were gathered and a boarding party under Lieutenant Edward Grey sent in to attack Preneuse at 20 : 00 . This party came under fire from the batteries but was able to successfully access the battered French frigate at 21 : 00 , finding that only the officers and a handful of sailors remained , the others having been given the opportunity to escape to the shore in boats rather than become prisoners of war . Among the captives was Lhermitte , who was permitted to bring his personal baggage with him before he was brought to the British squadron as a prisoner . Grey then set the wrecked ship alight before returning to Adamant , having executed his orders without losing a single man .

= = Aftermath = =

As Preneuse had gone ashore near Port Louis , Sercey had come to observe the engagement and therefore witnessed the destruction of the last of his squadron of 1796 . A commander without a command he subsequently took ship back to France and there retired from his commission , later returning to his family and settling on Île de France . The action temporarily left the French with no naval forces in the East Indies at all , although raiding cruises by privateers still posed a considerable threat to the British Indian Ocean trade routes . The only subsequent reinforcement to arrive in the region during the war was the frigate Chiffone was intercepted and captured at the Battle of Mahé shortly after arrival in 1801 , although substantial reinforcements did reach Île de France before the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars in 1803 .

Lhermitte subsequently came under criticism from historians for his failure to inflict greater damage on the light force in Algoa Bay : William James described it as " a somewhat discreditable action " . Granger was also heavily criticised for his performance in the action on 11 October : William Laird Clowes considered that " No explanation of the Jupiter 's failure can be given " , while James wrote of the action with Jupiter that " Undoubtedly it was a cause of triumph to Captain L 'Hermite and well calculated to wipe away the disgrace incurred by Preneuse at Algoa bay " .