

## = Bali Strait Incident =

The Bali Strait Incident was an encounter between a powerful French Navy frigate squadron and a convoy of British East India Company East Indiamen merchant ships in the Bali Strait on 28 January 1797 . The incident took place amidst the East Indies campaign of the French Revolutionary Wars ? repeated French attempts to disrupt the highly valuable British trade routes with British India and Qing Dynasty China . In 1796 , a large squadron of French frigates arrived in the Indian Ocean under the command of Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey . In July this force sailed on a commerce raiding cruise off British Ceylon , but a subsequent attack into the Straits of Malacca was driven off in an inconclusive engagement with two British ships of the line off Northeastern Sumatra . Forced to make repairs , Sercey took his squadron to the allied Batavian city of Batavia , sheltering there until January 1797 .

As Sercey left Batavia , the very valuable annual British trade convoy from Macau ( Portuguese treaty port in Southern China ) was due to sail . This convoy was worth millions of pounds and its capture would seriously harm the British economy . The British commander in the region , Admiral Peter Rainier split the convoy , taking four ships with a heavy escort through the Straits of Malacca , while the remaining six East Indiamen sailed unescorted through the supposedly safer Bali Strait . On 28 January , at the entrance to the Strait near the coast of Java the convoy was discovered by Sercey 's squadron .

The British commander , Charles Lennox , knew that if he fled his ships would be rapidly overwhelmed and instead attempted to bluff Sercey into believing that the convoy was formed not from lightly armed East Indiamen , but from the powerful ships of the line which they resembled . Lennox ordered his ships to advance on the French who retreated , convinced they were facing a superior enemy . Sercey did momentarily reconsider , when the British ships declined to attack the temporarily disabled frigate Forte , but eventually withdrew completely , retiring to his base at Île de France ( now Mauritius ) where he learned of his error . The China Fleet reached its destination with only one ship lost , wrecked in a storm the day after the encounter .

## = = Background = =

Trade through the East Indies was a vital component of the economy of Great Britain during the late eighteenth century . This trade was administered by the East India Company , which maintained trading ports throughout the region , most notably in British India at Bombay , Madras and Calcutta . The main bulk of this was carried on large merchant ships known as East Indiamen , which weighed between 500 and 1 @,@ 200 long tons ( 510 and 1 @,@ 220 t ) and traveled well @-@ armed , carrying up to 36 cannon . Due to their size and weaponry they could be mistaken for ships of the line , standard large warships of the period , a deception usually augmented by paintwork and dummy cannon . Despite their appearance however they could not fight off an enemy frigate or ship of the line as their guns were of inferior design , and their crew smaller and less well trained than those on a naval ship . An important component of the East India trade was an annual trade convoy from Macau , a Portuguese port in Qing Dynasty China . Early in each year , a large convoy of East Indiamen would sail from Macau , through the Indian Ocean and 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 ) .

By 1797 , Britain and the new French Republic had been engaged in the French Revolutionary Wars for nearly four years . Although there had been much fighting in Europe , the East Indies had remained largely under British control . French forces in the region were limited , and apart from a few raiding cruises the French squadron in the region had been under intermittent blockade at Île de France . The Royal Navy , commanded in Eastern waters by Rear @-@ Admiral Peter Rainier had focused on commerce protection and the elimination of the colonies of the French @-@ allied Batavian Republic , capturing Dutch Ceylon , the Dutch Cape Colony and parts of the Dutch East Indies in 1795 and 1796 . Rainier had been engaged in pacifying local uprisings around Malacca

during the latter part of the campaign , and there had been few forces left in reserve to protect British interests in the Indian Ocean .

In response to British activity in the region and the reluctance of the inhabitants of Île de France to follow orders from the National Convention abolishing slavery , the French dispatched a squadron of frigates to the East Indies early in 1796 . This force , led by Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey , originally comprised three frigates , subsequently joined by three more vessels , forming a powerful raiding squadron . After resupplying on Île de France in July , Sercey 's frigates cruised off the Ceylon coast , dissuaded from attacking the undefended ports of British India by false information fed to his scouts that a British battle squadron was at anchor in Calcutta . Turning eastwards , Sercey hoped to raid George Town at Penang , but was driven off in an inconclusive engagement with a British squadron off Sumatra on 9 September . He spent the winter sheltering in the Batavian harbour of Batavia on Java .

= = China Fleet = =

Sercey 's presence in the East Indies was known to the East India Company committee at Canton , who requested assistance from Rainier . The British admiral sailed to Macau in his flagship , the 74 @-@ gun ship of the line HMS Suffolk with the sloop HMS Swift and on 30 December met with four East Indiamen and two smaller " country ships " used for regional trade . Rainier elected to sail immediately , without waiting for the remainder of the convoy to assemble , escorting the small convoy through the Straits of Malacca during January reaching first Penang and then Madras by 13 February . Malacca was thought to be the most likely point for an ambush by the French squadron , and orders were issued by the committee for the remainder of the convoy , originally commanded by Captain Lestock Wilson and then by Captain Charles Lennox , to sail through either the Sape Strait , the Alas Strait or the Bali Strait , which were thought to be safer than Malacca .

Rainier did not meet Sercey , who had learned of the British plans and altered his own accordingly . Sailing from Batavia on 4 January , he cruised the Java Sea in search of the China convoy , wary that Rainier might be searching for him in turn . On 28 January , as his ships passed through the Bali Strait in bad weather , sails were sighted . Sercey immediately ordered the frigate Cybèle under Captain Pierre Julien Tréhouart to reconnoitre the approaching ships . Lennox had led his convoy directly into the path of the French squadron , whose six frigates were easily more powerful than his own six East Indiamen . The British officer was aware that he could not win a naval engagement with such a force and so instead resolved to bluff the French into thinking his merchant convoy was a squadron of ships of the line . When he saw Cybèle approaching , Lennox brought two ships forward to meet the frigate , gambling that in the low light Tréhouart might mistake the East Indiamen for warships .

Lennox compounded his ruse by raising Rainier 's Blue ensign on his flagship Woodford and instructing the rest of the convoy to raise ensigns of their own . The deception was so convincing that Tréhouart turned away well short of the British convoy , signalling to Sercey that " L 'ennemi est supérieur aux forces Français " ( " The enemy is superior in force to the French " ) . Sercey turned his squadron away , Cybèle passing close by the flagship Forte , Tréhouart hailing that the British ships comprised a battle squadron of two ships of the line and four frigates . Forte had lost its main topmast in the early stages of the retreat , and Sercey had noted that the British ships were not pursuing with the fervour expected of a superior force encountering a weaker one , but Tréhouart 's declaration convinced him he was outnumbered and he ordered his squadron to withdraw .

= = Orders of battle = =

= = Aftermath = =

Lennox turned the convoy westwards , bringing his ships safely into the Indian Ocean . One exception was the East Indiaman Ocean , which a storm drove onto a reef at Pulau Kalaotha in the

Lesser Sunda Islands the day after the incident , wrecking her . Three men drowned during the evacuation , and the local Makassar inhabitants killed another seven on 15 February in an attack . The survivors departed on hired proas three days later , reaching Amboyna safely on 28 February . Taunton Castle was damaged in the same storm and forced to make repairs at Amboyna , where she also took on board survivors from Ocean . Taunton Castle eventually reached Yarmouth in a disabled state some months later . The British commander was given the thanks of the East India Company and awarded 500 guineas .

Sercey retired with his frigates to Île de France , where he learned to his horror of the opportunity he had missed in the Bali Strait . His squadron required extensive repairs , but the Colonial Committee on Île de France remained rebellious over attempts to abolish slavery and denied his ships men and food supplies . Eventually Sercey was forced to disband his squadron , sending four frigates back to France . Seven years after the Bali Strait Incident , early in the Napoleonic Wars a much larger China Fleet was attacked by another strong French naval squadron at the Battle of Pulo Aura . As in 1797 , the British commander Nathaniel Dance managed to convince the French admiral that there were warships among his convoy and the French retired after a brief exchange of gunfire .