

= Action of 31 May 1809 =

The Action of 31 May 1809 was a naval skirmish in the Bay of Bengal during the Napoleonic Wars . During the action , an Honourable East India Company convoy carrying goods worth over £ 500 @, @ 000 was attacked and partially captured by the French frigate Caroline . The three East Indiamen that made up the convoy fought against their opponent with their own batteries of cannon but ultimately were less powerful , less manoeuvrable and less trained than their opponent and were defeated one by one ; only the smallest of the three escaped . The action was the first in a string of attacks on important convoys in the Indian Ocean by French cruisers operating from Île de France and Île Bonaparte during a concerted campaign against British shipping in the region .

= = Background = =

In November 1808 , a squadron of powerful French frigates sailed for Île de France under Commodore Jacques Hamelin . This squadron was under orders to attack and capture or destroy British shipping in the Indian Ocean , particularly the heavily armed convoys of East Indiamen that carried millions of pounds worth of trade goods from British India and the Far East to Britain . These convoys were operated by the Honourable East India Company (HEIC) , which ran British India and maintained a private army and navy to secure the colony and its trade routes . During the late Napoleonic Wars , French naval strategy focused on the disruption of this trade with the use of fast and well @-@ armed frigates to operate independently along British trade routes and capture British merchant ships . This affected the British economy , which was already severely stretched by the war , and forced the Royal Navy to divert resources to distant parts of the world to protect British trade .

During the late spring of 1809 , following the end of the Indian Ocean hurricane season , Hamelin ordered his ships to operate in the Bay of Bengal . One of these frigates was the 40 @-@ gun Caroline , which was built in Antwerp in 1806 and weighed 1 @, @ 078 tons . Caroline was commanded by Jean @-@ Baptiste @-@ Henri F  retier , newly promoted following the sudden death of her previous captain . F  retier was the first of Hamelin 's captains to find a British convoy , spotting three sails on the horizon on 31 May . These belonged to a Britain @-@ bound convoy of East Indiamen , which had departed the Hooghly River on 2 May . Laden with over £ 500 @, @ 000 worth of silk and other trade goods , these ships were an important asset to the HEIC and had originally been part of a larger convoy , guarded by the sloop HMS Victor and consisting of five Indiamen and several smaller vessels . On 24 May a storm divided the convoy ; Victor , the small ships and two of the Indiamen Monarch and Earl Spencer were separated from the remainder , the Streatham , Europe and Lord Keith after Monarch sprang a leak .

The Indiamen were not unprotected : each one was large and powerfully built and carried a number of cannon . Streatham and Europe weighed over 800 tons each and carried 30 cannon , whereas the smaller Lord Keith was 600 tons and carried 12 guns . Four years earlier , a convoy of East Indiamen had driven off a French ship of the line and attached frigates under Admiral Linois in similar waters by forming a battle line and firing on their opponents as they closed . The crews of these East Indiamen were not of Royal Navy standard , however , with insufficient training and large numbers of Chinese and lascar seamen , who proved unreliable in combat .

= = Battle = =

One of the smaller ships from the convoy , an American merchant ship named Silenus , had separated from the main body in the storm and arrived at the Nicobar Islands . There she had encountered Caroline and the American captain had reported the location and value of the convoy to F  retier . Setting all sail , F  retier took Caroline to the north @-@ west , and sighted the convoy at 05 : 30 , only a few days after leaving the Nicobar Islands . The British ships , under the loose command of John Dale in Streatham , originally mistook the French frigate for the missing Victor and it was not until another half @-@ hour had passed that Dale realised the danger his ships were in .

Ordering the Indiamen to form a line of battle , Dale placed his ship in the centre , with the small Lord Keith ahead and Europe behind . However , the lack of naval experience on the British ships resulted in the Indiamen sailing too far from one another in line , thus leaving them unable to provide effective mutual support .

Able to attack the HEIC ships individually , Caroline pulled alongside Europe at 06 : 30 and began a heavy fire into the merchant ship , which intermittently replied with her available guns . Within 30 minutes , Europe 's rigging was tattered , many of her guns dismounted and a number of her crew wounded or killed . Moving past his now disabled opponent , Féretier next attacked Streatham , which had slowed in an unsuccessful attempt to support Europe . Now alone against the frigate , Streatham came under heavy fire at 07 : 00 and by 08 : 00 was badly damaged , with casualties in her crew , her guns all dismounted and her lascars hiding below decks . With further resistance hopeless , Dale hauled down the company flag and surrendered .

During the engagement between Streatham and Caroline , Lord Keith and Europe had fired sporadically at the French ship with little effect . Pulling away from his surrendered opponent , Féretier then fired on Lord Keith , whose captain , Peter Campbell , realised that his ship stood no chance against the frigate and turned eastward , running before the wind to escape despite suffering severe damage to Lord Keith ' rigging as he did so . William Gelston , captain of Europe , also attempted to flee , but his battered ship was in no condition to outrun the virtually untouched frigate , and he surrendered at 10 : 00 . Lord Keith eventually arrived safely at Penang on 9 June . Casualties on the British ships were six killed and at least four wounded , while the French lost one killed and three wounded .

= = Aftermath = =

Féretier repaired his captures at sea and returned to Île de France , arriving two months later on 22 July . Discovering the presence of a British frigate squadron under Josias Rowley off Port Louis , Féretier diverted to Saint Paul on Île Bonaparte . Among the goods removed from the ships were the £ 500 @ , @ 000 worth of silk , which was stored in warehouses near the docks . In the British raid on Saint Paul on 21 September 1809 , these warehouses and their contents were burnt and Caroline , Streatham and Europe all captured by the raiding force . Despite these subsequent losses , Féretier was highly commended for his leadership in the action and received a promotion from Governor Charles Decaen . He also received letters from the captains of Streatham and Europe , thanking him for his attention and courtesy to their crews and passengers during their period of captivity .