

= Battle of Île Ronde =

The Battle of Île Ronde was a minor naval engagement between small French Navy and British Royal Navy squadrons off Île de France , now named Mauritius , in the early stages of the French Revolutionary Wars . The battle was fought over control of the waters around Île de France , which was under blockade from the British squadron as French warships and privateers operating from the island posed a significant threat to vital British trade routes connected to British India and China .

In an attempt to neutralise the island , the British commander in the region , Peter Rainier ordered the 50 @-@ gun HMS Centurion and 44 @-@ gun HMS Diomedé to institute a blockade , which began in October 1794 . Concerned by food shortages and a rebellious slave population the French naval commander Jean @-@ Marie Renaud led his small squadron comprising frigates Cybèle and Prudente and three smaller vessels to drive off the British squadron . On 22 October , the squadrons met off Île Ronde , an islet off northern Île de France .

The battle lasted two and a quarter hours , in which Centurion and Cybèle fought a close duel which left both ships badly damaged . Supported by the remainder of the squadron , Cybèle successfully withdrew under fire , but Centurion , without support from the distant Diomedé was also forced to retire for repairs . Unable to continue the blockade the British force returned to India , allowing food supplies to reach Île de France . Due to the necessity for campaigns against Dutch Ceylon and the Dutch East Indies , the British blockade was not renewed , but the French were unable to take advantage due to increasing civil unrest among the island 's population .

= = Background = =

War between the French Republic and Great Britain began on 1 February 1793 , news arriving among the French and British East Indian colonies on 11 June 1793 . The strongest French positions in the Indian Ocean were the islands of Île de France and Réunion , which lay substantially to the west of the British bases at Bombay and Madras in British India . A small French frigate squadron , supported by smaller warships and privateers operated from the islands posing a considerable threat to British maritime trade in the Indian Ocean .

To counter the threat the British commander in the region , Captain Peter Rainier ordered two of his ships to blockade the island during the summer of 1794 . Rainer 's force comprised the 50 @-@ gun fourth rate ship 50 @-@ gun HMS Centurion under Captain Samuel Osborne and the large 44 @-@ gun frigate HMS Diomedé under Captain Matthew Smith . Together the ships sailed from Madras on 30 August 1794 , stopping at the allied port of Trincomalee in Dutch Ceylon and the undefended French @-@ controlled island of Rodrigues before arriving off Île de France in October .

Île de France had been in a state of turmoil since the French Revolution and in 1792 the republican party on the island seized control . In 1794 suspected royalists were arrested , including the naval commander Saint @-@ Félix , their executions forestalled by the arrival of news that the French Convention had abolished slavery . Only the intervention of Governor Malartic prevented unrest . The preoccupation of the naval authorities had prevented any offensive operations and the reduced squadron , now commanded by Captain Jean @-@ Marie Renaud , remained in Port Louis .

= = Battle = =

Despite the upheaval on shore , the arrival of the British blockade squadron provoked Renaud into taking action . Although the defences of Île de France were well prepared under Malartic 's orders , food supplies were running low , with only rice still available in quantity . The potential for famine and consequent social unrest among the slave population was severe and Renaud sailed immediately to intercept Centurion and Diomedé . The French squadron comprised the 40 @-@ gun frigate Cybèle under Captain Pierre Tréhouart , the 36 @-@ gun Prudente under Renaud and the 14 @-@ gun brig Courier under Lieutenant Garreau . The force was accompanied by the 20 @-@ gun privateer corvettes Jean @-@ Bart and Rosalie as well as the aviso Sans @-@ Culottes . The ships ' crews were heavily augmented by volunteers , including a young Robert Surcouf on Cybèle , as well as a

detachment of soldiers .

Renaud 's squadron sailed on 19 October , seeking the British to the north of the island . At 11 : 00 on 22 October , close to the uninhabited islet of Île Ronde northwest of Île de France the British ships were sighted . Osborne issued orders to advance on the French squadron , Renaud responding by forming his ships in a line of battle and advancing to meet Osborne . Prudente led the French line , closely followed by Cybèle , Jean @-@ Bart and Courier , Osborne focusing on the former and ordering Smith to engage the latter . Firing began at 15 : 29 when Prudente unleashed a close range broadside at Centurion , followed immediately by fire from the ships of both sides . Centurion was damaged in the opening exchanges and by 16 : 00 had most of her sails and rigging torn . At this Renaud ordered his squadron to pull back to leeward out of range , each firing on Centurion as they passed .

As Cybèle came within range of Centurion the frigate 's fire brought down the British ship 's mizen topmast and fore topgallantmast . Return fire from Centurion managed however to sufficiently damage the French ship that she was unable to retreat in the light winds and the two largely immobilised ships began a close range duel . For more than an hour the exchange continued , Renaud unable to intervene from leeward and Smith repeatedly refusing Osborne 's orders to support his ship , Diomedé remaining at long range and contributing an intermittent and inaccurate fire on the distant Cybèle . At 17 : 15 a light breeze enabled Tréhouart to slowly pull his ship towards Renaud 's force despite the loss of the main topgallantmast . At 17 : 45 , with Prudente close by , the main topmast fell on Cybèle , which had 3 feet (0 @.@ 91 m) of water in the hold , but Osborne , outnumbered and with his ship damaged reluctantly withdrew . The threat lifted , Renaud was able to take Cybèle under tow and retire in the direction of Île de France , followed distantly and ineffectually by Diomedé until night fell .

= = = Combatant summary = = =

In this table , " Guns " refers to all cannon carried by the ship , including the maindeck guns which were taken into consideration when calculating it 's rate , as well as any carronades carried aboard . Broadside weight records the combined weight of shot which could be fired in a single simultaneous discharge of an entire broadside .

= = Aftermath = =

The immediate result of the battle was inconclusive , both squadrons retiring with one ship damaged apiece . French losses had been heavy , with 15 killed and 20 wounded on Prudente , the latter including Renaud and 22 killed and 62 wounded on Cybèle . One sailor was killed and five wounded on Jean @-@ Bart and no casualties were reported on Courier . By contrast , Centurion had only three men killed and 23 wounded and Diomedé none at all , but the damage to Osborne 's ship was more severe ; while Renaud could repair and resupply his ships in nearby Port Louis , repairs to Centurion could only be effected in India , several thousand miles away . Osborne was thus forced to abandon the blockade and retire , Centurion to Bombay and Diomedé to Madras .

The action brought repercussions for Smith , whose failure to support Osborne was noted ; although Smith claimed that he was simply maintaining the line of battle , it subsequently emerged that the captains had engaged in a personal dispute in result of which Smith had decided to refuse Osborne 's orders . After his behaviour had featured in Osborne 's initial dispatch , Smith challenged his account and Osborne demanded a court @-@ martial held to investigate . This panel decided that Smith 's behaviour was unacceptable and he was dismissed from the Navy , by which time he had lost Diomedé , wrecked on a rock in Trincomalee Bay on 2 August 1795 during the invasion of Ceylon . Although Smith appealed his sentence and was restored to the captain 's list in 1798 he was never again called to service and retired in 1806 .

British historians have considered that Smith 's refusal to participate probably cost Osborne the battle . William James wrote that his behaviour was " the principle reason that Cybèle , at least , was not made a prize of by the British " . C. Northcote Parkinson considers the action " indecisive " but

concurs with James ' assessment that Smith 's intervention could have resulted in a British victory but instead that " the first encounter of the war between the French and English in the East Indies had resulted in what was tantamount to defeat for the latter " .

On Île de France the relief of the blockade meant that shipping , particularly American vessels laden with food supplies from Tamatave on Madagascar , could reach the island and the threatened famine was averted . French privateers were also again free to operate against British trade , particularly in the Bay of Bengal . With Renaud 's squadron still at Port Louis , Rainier considered renewing the blockade , but was dissuaded by the dangers of the monsoon season and a false report that a squadron of French ships of the line was soon due to arrive on Île de France . In 1795 he was distracted by the sudden need to guard against the Dutch East India colonies following the French conquest of the Netherlands , and he supervised the invasion of Ceylon and operations against the Dutch East Indies . By the time his attention turned once more to Île de France , it had been heavily reinforced in early 1796 by a frigate squadron commanded by Contre @-@ amiral Sercey .