

= Action of 25 September 1806 =

The Action of 25 September 1806 was a naval battle fought during the Napoleonic Wars off the French Biscay port of Rochefort . A French squadron comprising five frigates and two corvettes , sailing to the French West Indies with supplies and reinforcements , was intercepted by a British squadron of six ships of the line that was keeping a close blockade of the port as part of the Atlantic campaign of 1806 . The British ships , under the command of Commodore Sir Samuel Hood , spotted the French convoy early in the morning of 25 September , just a few hours after the French had left port , and immediately gave chase . Although the French ships tried to escape , they were heavily laden with troops and stores , and the strong winds favoured the larger ships of the line , which caught the French convoy after a five @-@ hour pursuit , although they had become separated from one another during the chase .

At 05 : 00 the leading British ship , HMS Monarch , was within range and opened fire on the French squadron , which divided . One frigate went north and was intercepted by HMS Mars , while another , accompanied by the two corvettes , turned south and managed to outrun HMS Windsor Castle . The main body of the French force remained together and met the attack of Monarch and the British flagship HMS Centaur with their broadsides . Although outnumbered and outclassed by the British squadron the French ships fought hard , inflicting damage on the leading British ships and severely wounding Commodore Hood . Eventually the strength of the British squadron told , and despite a fierce resistance the French ships surrendered one by one , the British capturing four of the seven vessels in the squadron .

= = Background = =

The principal naval campaign of 1806 was fought in the Atlantic Ocean , following a raid by two large French battle squadrons on British trade routes , focused particularly on the Caribbean . The security of the French Caribbean was under severe threat during the wars , as the Royal Navy dominated the region and restricted French movements both between the islands and between the West Indies and France itself . This dominance was enforced by rigorous blockade , in which British ships attempted to ensure that no French military or commercial vessel was able to enter or leave French harbours both in Europe and in the French colonies . In the Caribbean , this strategy was designed to destroy the economies and morale of the French West Indian territories in preparation for attack by British expeditionary forces . To counter this strategy , the French government repeatedly sent convoys and individual warships to the French Caribbean islands with supplies of food , military equipment and reinforcements . These resupply efforts ranged from small individual corvettes to large battle squadrons and were under orders to avoid conflict wherever possible . Despite these orders , many were intercepted by British blockade forces , either in the Caribbean or off the French coast itself .

The largest French resupply effort of the Napoleonic Wars was a squadron under Contre @-@ Admiral Corentin @-@ Urbain Leissègues , sent to Santo Domingo in December 1805 with troops and supplies . In conjunction with a second squadron under Vice @-@ Admiral Jean @-@ Baptiste Willaumez , this force was then ordered to raid British trade routes and disrupt the movement of British merchant shipping across the Atlantic . Leissègues reached Santo Domingo in February 1806 , but within days a British battle squadron had intercepted and destroyed his force at the Battle of San Domingo . Willaumez was able to avoid attack by British forces during the spring of 1806 , and cruised in the Caribbean during much of the summer , but his force was eventually dispersed by a hurricane in August and the survivors forced to shelter on the American Eastern Seaboard . Unaware of the dispersal of Willaumez 's squadron , the British naval authorities sought to block its return to Europe by stationing strong battle squadrons off the principal French Atlantic ports . One of their most important targets was the city of Rochefort , heavily fortified port in which a powerful French naval force was based , and a squadron of six Royal Navy ships of the line was assigned to watch it in case Willaumez attempted to return there . In August , command of the blockade squadron was awarded to Commodore Sir Samuel Hood , a highly experience naval commander .

In Rochefort , an expedition was planned to carry supplies to the French West Indies while the British were distracted by Willaumez 's operations . Assigned to the operation was Commodore Eleonore @-@ Jean @-@ Nicolas Soleil , an officer who had served on Allemand 's expedition , a successful operation the year before . To carry the supplies and reinforcements , Soleil was provided with seven ships : Four large modern frigates rated at 40 @-@ guns but actually carrying 44 ? 46 , a smaller and older frigate of 36 guns and two small corvettes of 16 guns each . All of the ships were heavily laden , each carrying as many as 650 men , but it was hoped that their size and speed would allow them to defeat anything smaller than they were and to escape anything larger .

= = Battle = =

Soleil 's squadron departed Rochefort on the evening of 24 September , aiming to bypass Hood 's squadron in the dark . However at 01 : 00 on 25 September , with the wind coming from the northeast , lookouts on HMS Monarch spotted sails to the east . Hood 's squadron was spread out , tacking southeast towards the Chassiron Lighthouse at Saint @-@ Denis @-@ d 'Oléron with HMS Centaur in the centre , HMS Revenge to the east (or windward) and Monarch to the west . HMS Mars was also close by , with the rest of the squadron spread out in the rear . Hood 's immediate reaction was that the sails must belong to a squadron of French ships of the line , and ordered his ships to form a line of battle in anticipation . Even as the signal was raised however , lookouts on Monarch identified the strangers as frigates and Hood abandoned his previous orders and raised a new signal ordering a general chase , confident that his ships could destroy the convoy even without the power and defensive capability of a line of battle .

As soon as Soleil realised that he had been spotted he gave orders for his ships to sail to the southwest as fast as possible , hoping to outdistance the British squadron . However his convoy were all heavily laden and were therefore slower than they would normally be , while the heavy swell and strong winds favoured the large ships of the line . The chase continued throughout the night , until by 04 : 00 Monarch was clearly gaining on the convoy , with Centaur 8 nautical miles (15 km) behind . At 05 : 00 , Captain Richard Lee was close enough to fire his bow @-@ chasers , small guns situated at the front of his ship , at the rearmost French frigate , the Armide . Captain Jean @-@ Jacques @-@ Jude Langlois returned the fire with his stern @-@ chasers and the French ships raised the Tricolour in anticipation of battle . Recognising that he was facing an overwhelming British force , Soleil split his ships , sending Thétis and the corvettes Lynx and Sylphe southwards and Infatigable to the north . This had limited success in achieving the desired effect of dividing the pursuit , with Captain William Lukin taking HMS Mars out of the British line in pursuit of Infatigable while the slow HMS Windsor Castle was sent after the three south bound ships , but the main body of the Royal Navy squadron remained on course .

At 10 : 00 , Soleil accepted that his remaining ships would rapidly be overhauled by Monarch and drew them together , forming a compact group with which to receive the British attack . He also ordered his captains to focus their fire on the enemy sails , rigging and masts , hoping to inflict enough damage to delay the pursuit and allow his force to escape . Within minutes Monarch was heavily engaged with Armide and Minerve but Captain Lee found himself at a disadvantage : the heavy swell that has suited his ship during the chase also prevented him from opening his lower gunports in case of flooding . This halved his available cannon and as a result his isolated ship began to suffer severe damage to its rigging and sails from the frigates ' gunnery . Within 20 minutes , Monarch was unable to manoeuvre , but Lee continued fighting until Centaur could reach the melee , the flagship opening fire at 11 : 00 . Hood passed the battling Monarch and Minerve , concentrating his fire on Armide and the flagship Gloire . For another 45 minutes the battle continued , Centaur suffering damage to her rigging and sails from the French shot and taking casualties from musket fire from the soldiers carried aboard . Among the wounded was Commodore Hood , who was shot in the right forearm , the ball eventually lodging in his shoulder . Hood retired below and command passed to his second in command , Lieutenant Case .

At 11 : 45 , Armide surrendered to Centaur , followed 15 minutes later by Minerve . Both ships had suffered heavy damage and casualties in the unequal engagement and could not hope to continue

their resistance with the rest of the British squadron rapidly approaching . To the north , Infatigable had failed to outrun Mars and Captain Lukin forced the frigate to surrender after a brief cannonade . With three ships lost and the other three long disappeared to the south , Soleil determined to flee westwards , hoping the damage he had inflicted on Centaur 's sails was sufficient to prevent her pursuit . However , Gloire had also been damaged and could not distance herself from the British flagship sufficiently before support arrived in the form of Mars . With his ship undamaged , Lukin was able to easily catch the fleeing frigate and opened fire at 14 : 30 , combat continuing for half an hour before Soleil surrendered , his frigate badly damaged . To the south , Windsor Castle had proven far too slow to catch the smaller French ships , which had easily outrun the second rate and escaped .

= = Aftermath = =

It took some time for the British squadron to effect repairs on their ships and prizes in preparation for the journey back to Britain . They had suffered light casualties of nine killed and 29 wounded , but among the more seriously injured was Hood , whose arm had been amputated during the battle . [Note A] French losses were much heavier but are unknown : Hood did not include them in his official report but promised to provide them soon afterwards in a follow up letter , which , if it was written , has never been located . All four of the captured frigates were large new vessels that were immediately purchased for service in the Royal Navy , Gloire and Armide retaining their names while Infatigable became HMS Immortalite and Minerve became HMS Alceste . Although Hood and his men were commended at the time , subsequent historical focus has been on the bravery of the inexperienced French crews in resisting an attack by an overwhelming force for so long . William James wrote in 1827 of the " gallant conduct on the part of the French ships " and William Laird Clowes , writing in 1900 stated that " The resistance offered by the French to a force so superior was in every way credible " .

Within days of the action Hood had been promoted to rear @-@ admiral and awarded a pension of £ 500 a year , but despite his wound he continued in service , fighting a notable action with Russian ships in the Baltic Sea in 1807 and later operating off the Spanish coast in the early Peninsular War . French efforts to resupply their West Indian colonies continued throughout the next three years , costing a heavy toll of men and ships lost to the British blockade . By 1808 , the situation in the French Caribbean had become desperate and the French increased their supply convoys , losing five frigates and a ship of the line in failed reinforcement efforts during late 1808 and early 1809 . The weakened colonies were unable to resist British attack , and co @-@ ordinated invasions forced the surrender of first Martinique in January 1809 and Guadeloupe a year later , Cayenne and Santo Domingo also falling to British , Spanish and Portuguese forces .

= = Order of battle = =