

= Battle of the Chesapeake =

The Battle of the Chesapeake , also known as the Battle of the Virginia Capes or simply the Battle of the Capes , was a crucial naval battle in the American War of Independence that took place near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay on 5 September 1781 , between a British fleet led by Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves and a French fleet led by Rear Admiral Francois Joseph Paul , the Comte de Grasse . Although tactically indecisive , the battle was strategically decisive , since it prevented the Royal Navy from reinforcing or evacuating the forces of Lieutenant General Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown , Virginia . When the French were able to achieve control of the sea lanes against the British , the result was the reinforcement of the Franco @-@ American army with siege artillery and French reinforcements ? all of which proved decisive in the Siege of Yorktown , effectively securing independence for the Thirteen Colonies .

Presented in July 1781 with the options of attacking British forces in either New York or Virginia , Admiral de Grasse opted for the latter , arriving at the Chesapeake at the end of August . Upon learning that de Grasse had sailed from the West Indies for North America , and that French Admiral de Barras had also sailed from Newport , Rhode Island , Admiral Graves concluded that they were going to join forces at the Chesapeake . Sailing south from New York with 19 ships of the line , Graves arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake early on 5 September to see de Grasse 's fleet at anchor in the bay . De Grasse hastily prepared most of his fleet , 24 ships of the line , for battle and sailed out to meet Graves . In a two @-@ hour engagement that took place after hours of manoeuvring , the lines of the two fleets did not completely meet , with only the forward and center sections of the lines fully engaging . The battle was consequently fairly evenly matched , although the British suffered more casualties and ship damage . The battle broke off when the sun set . British tactics in the battle have been a subject of contemporary and historical debate ever since .

For several days the two fleets sailed within view of each other , with de Grasse preferring to lure the British away from the bay , where Barras was expected to arrive carrying vital siege equipment . On 13 September de Grasse broke away from the British and returned to the Chesapeake , where Barras had arrived . Graves returned to New York to organize a larger relief effort ; this did not sail until 19 October , two days after Cornwallis surrendered .

= = Background = =

During the early months of 1781 , both pro @-@ British and separatist forces began concentrating in Virginia , a state that had previously not experienced more than naval raids . The British forces were led at first by the turncoat Benedict Arnold , and then by William Phillips before General Charles , Earl Cornwallis arrived in late May with his southern army to take command . In June he marched to Williamsburg , where he received a confusing series of orders from General Sir Henry Clinton that culminated in a directive to establish a fortified deep water port (which would allow resupply by sea) . In response to these orders , Cornwallis moved to Yorktown in late July , where his army began building fortifications . The presence of these British troops , coupled with General Clinton 's desire for a port there , made control of the Chesapeake Bay an essential naval objective for both sides .

On 21 May Generals George Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau , respectively the commanders of the Continental Army and the Expédition Particulière , met to discuss potential operations against the British and Loyalists . They considered either an assault or siege on the principal British base at New York City , or operations against the British forces in Virginia . Since either of these options would require the assistance of the French fleet , then in the West Indies , a ship was dispatched to meet with French Rear Admiral François Joseph Paul , comte de Grasse who was expected at Cap @-@ Français (now known as Cap @-@ Haïtien , Haiti) , outlining the possibilities and requesting his assistance . Rochambeau , in a private note to de Grasse , indicated that his preference was for an operation against Virginia . The two generals then moved their forces to White Plains , New York , to study New York 's defenses and await news from de Grasse .

= = Arrival of the fleets = =

De Grasse arrived at Cap @-@ Français on 15 August . He immediately dispatched his response , which was that he would make for the Chesapeake . Taking on 3 @,@ 200 troops , he sailed from Cap @-@ Français with his entire fleet , 28 ships of the line . Sailing outside the normal shipping lanes to avoid notice , he arrived at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay on August 30 , and disembarked the troops to assist in the land blockade of Cornwallis . Two British frigates that were supposed to be on patrol outside the bay were trapped inside the bay by de Grasse 's arrival ; this prevented the British in New York from learning the full strength of de Grasse 's fleet until it was too late .

British Admiral George Brydges Rodney , who had been tracking de Grasse around the West Indies , was alerted to the latter 's departure , but was uncertain of the French admiral 's destination . Believing that de Grasse would return a portion of his fleet to Europe , Rodney detached Rear Admiral Sir Samuel Hood with 14 ships of the line and orders to find de Grasse 's destination in North America . Rodney , who was ill , sailed for Europe with the rest of his fleet in order to recover , refit his fleet , and to avoid the Atlantic hurricane season .

Sailing more directly than de Grasse , Hood 's fleet arrived off the entrance to the Chesapeake on 25 August . Finding no French ships there , he then sailed for New York . Meanwhile , his colleague and commander of the New York fleet , Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves , had spent several weeks trying to intercept a convoy organized by John Laurens to bring much @-@ needed supplies and hard currency from France to Boston . When Hood arrived at New York , he found that Graves was in port (having failed to intercept the convoy) , but had only five ships of the line that were ready for battle .

De Grasse had notified his counterpart in Newport , the Comte de Barras Saint @-@ Laurent , of his intentions and his planned arrival date . Barras sailed from Newport on 27 August with 8 ships of the line , 4 frigates , and 18 transports carrying French armaments and siege equipment . He deliberately sailed via a circuitous route in order to minimize the possibility of an encounter with the British , should they sail from New York in pursuit . Washington and Rochambeau , in the meantime , had crossed the Hudson on 24 August , leaving some troops behind as a ruse to delay any potential move on the part of General Clinton to mobilize assistance for Cornwallis .

News of Barras ' departure led the British to realize that the Chesapeake was the probable target of the French fleets . By 31 August , Graves had moved his five ships of the line out of New York harbor to meet with Hood 's force . Taking command of the combined fleet , now 19 ships , Graves sailed south , and arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake on 5 September . His progress was slow ; the poor condition of some of the West Indies ships (contrary to claims by Admiral Hood that his fleet was fit for a month of service) necessitated repairs en route . Graves was also concerned about some ships in his own fleet ; Europe in particular had difficulty manoeuvring .

= = Battle lines form = =

French and British patrol frigates each spotted the other 's fleet around 9 : 30 am ; both at first underestimated the size of the other fleet , leading each commander to believe the other fleet was the smaller fleet of Admiral de Barras . When the true size of the fleets became apparent , Graves assumed that de Grasse and Barras had already joined forces , and prepared for battle ; he directed his line toward the bay 's mouth , assisted by winds from the north @-@ northeast .

De Grasse had detached a few of his ships to blockade the York and James Rivers farther up the bay , and many of the ships at anchor were missing officers , men , and boats when the British fleet was sighted . He faced the difficult proposition of organizing a line of battle while sailing against an incoming tide , with winds and land features that would require him to do so on a tack opposite that of the British fleet . At 11 : 30 am , 24 ships of the French fleet cut their anchor lines and began sailing out of the bay with the noon tide , leaving behind the shore contingents and ships ' boats . Some ships were so seriously undermanned , missing as many as 200 men , that not all of their guns could be manned . De Grasse had ordered the ships to form into a line as they exited the bay , in order of speed and without regard to its normal sailing order . Admiral Louis de Bougainville 's

Auguste was one of the first ships out . With a squadron of three other ships Bougainville ended up well ahead of the rest of the French line ; by 3 : 45 pm the gap was large enough that the British could have cut his squadron off from the rest of the French fleet .

By 1 : 00 pm , the two fleets were roughly facing each other , but sailing on opposite tacks . In order to engage , and to avoid some shoals (known as the Middle Ground) near the mouth of the bay , Graves around 2 : 00 pm ordered his whole fleet to wear , a manoeuvre that reversed his line of battle , but enabled it to line up with the French fleet as its ships exited the bay . This placed the squadron of Hood , his most aggressive commander , at the rear of the line , and that of Admiral Francis Samuel Drake in the van .

At this point , both fleets were sailing generally east , away from the bay , with winds from the north @-@ northeast . The two lines were approaching at an angle so that the leading ships of the vans of both lines were within range of each other , while the ships at the rear were too far apart to engage . The French had a firing advantage , since the wind conditions meant they could open their lower gun ports , while the British had to leave theirs closed to avoid water washing onto the lower decks . The French fleet , which was in a better state of repair than the British fleet , outnumbered the British in the number of ships and total guns , and had heavier guns capable of throwing more weight . In the British fleet , Ajax and Terrible , two ships of the West Indies squadron that were among the most heavily engaged , were in quite poor condition . Graves at this point did not press the potential advantage of the separated French van ; as the French centre and rear closed the distance with the British line , they also closed the distance with their own van . One British observer wrote , " To the astonishment of the whole fleet , the French center were permitted without molestation to bear down to support their van . "

The need for the two lines to actually reach parallel lines so they might fully engage led Graves to give conflicting signals that were interpreted critically differently by Admiral Hood , directing the rear squadron , than Graves intended . None of the options for closing the angle between the lines presented a favourable option to the British commander : any manoeuvre to bring ships closer would limit their firing ability to their bow guns , and potentially expose their decks to raking or enfilading fire from the enemy ships . Graves hoisted two signals : one for " line ahead " , under which the ships would slowly close the gap and then straighten the line when parallel to the enemy , and one for " close action " , which normally indicated that ships should turn to directly approach the enemy line , turning when the appropriate distance was reached . This combination of signals resulted in the piecemeal arrival of his ships into the range of battle . Admiral Hood interpreted the instruction to maintain line of battle to take precedence over the signal for close action , and as a consequence his squadron did not close rapidly and never became significantly engaged in the action .

= = Battle = =

It was about 4 : 00 pm , over 6 hours since the two fleets had first sighted each other , when the British ? who had the weather gage , and therefore the initiative ? opened their attack . The battle began with HMS Intrepid opening fire against the Marseillais , its counterpart near the head of the line . The action very quickly became general , with the van and center of each line fully engaged . The French , in a practice they were known for , tended to aim at British masts and rigging , with the intent of crippling their opponent 's mobility . The effects of this tactic were apparent in the engagement : Shrewsbury and HMS Intrepid , at the head of the British line , became virtually impossible to manage , and eventually fell out of the line . The rest of Admiral Drake 's squadron also suffered heavy damage , but the casualties were not as severe as those taken on the first two ships . The angle of approach of the British line also played a role in the damage they sustained ; ships in their van were exposed to raking fire when only their bow guns could be brought to bear on the French .

The French van also took a beating , although it was less severe . Captain de Boades of the Réfléchi was killed in the opening broadside of Admiral Drake 's Princessa , and the four ships of the French van were , according to a French observer , " engaged with seven or eight vessels at close quarters . " The Diadème , according to a French officer " was utterly unable to keep up the battle ,

having only four thirty @-@ six @-@ pounders and nine eighteen @-@ pounders fit for use " and was badly shot up ; she was rescued by the timely intervention of the Saint @-@ Esprit .

The Princessa and Bougainville 's Auguste at one point were close enough that the French admiral considered a boarding action ; Drake managed to pull away , but this gave Bougainville the chance to target the Terrible . Her foremast , already in bad shape before the battle , was struck by several French cannonballs , and her pumps , already overtaxed in an attempt to keep her afloat , were badly damaged by shots " between wind and water " .

Around 5 : 00 pm the wind began to shift , to British disadvantage . De Grasse gave signals for the van to move further ahead so that more of the French fleet might engage , but Bougainville , fully engaged with the British van at musket range , did not want to risk " severe handling had the French presented the stern . " When he did finally begin pulling away , British leaders interpreted it as a retreat : " the French van suffered most , because it was obliged to bear away . " Rather than follow , the British hung back , continuing to fire at long range ; this prompted one French officer to write that the British " only engaged from far off and simply in order to be able to say that they had fought . " Sunset brought an end to the firefight , with both fleets continuing on a roughly southeast tack , away from the bay .

The center of both lines was engaged , but the level of damage and casualties suffered was noticeably less . Ships in the rear squadrons were almost entirely uninvolved ; Admiral Hood reported that three of his ships fired a few shots . The ongoing conflicting signals left by Graves , and discrepancies between his and Hood 's records of what signals had been given and when , led to immediate recriminations , written debate , and an eventual formal inquiry .

= = Standoff = =

That evening Graves did a damage assessment . He noted that " the French had not the appearance of near so much damage as we had sustained " , and that five of his fleet were either leaking or virtually crippled in their mobility . De Grasse wrote that " we perceived by the sailing of the English that they had suffered greatly . " Nonetheless , Graves maintained a windward position through the night , so that he would have the choice of battle in the morning . Ongoing repairs made it clear to Graves that he would be unable to attack the next day . On the night of 6 September he held council with Hood and Drake . During this meeting Hood and Graves supposedly exchanged words concerning the conflicting signals , and Hood proposed turning the fleet around to make for the Chesapeake . Graves rejected the plan , and the fleets continued to drift eastward , away from Cornwallis . On 8 and 9 September the French fleet at times gained the advantage of the wind , and briefly threatened the British with renewed action . French scouts spied Barras ' fleet on 9 September , and de Grasse turned his fleet back toward Chesapeake Bay that night . Arriving on 12 September , he found that Barras had arrived two days earlier . Graves ordered the Terrible to be scuttled on 11 September due to her leaky condition , and was notified on 13 September that the French fleet was back in the Chesapeake ; he still did not learn that de Grasse 's line had not included the fleet of Barras , because the frigate captain making the report had not counted the ships . In a council held that day , the British admirals decided against attacking the French , due to " the truly lamentable state we have brought ourself . " Graves then turned his battered fleet toward New York , arriving off Sandy Hook on 20 September .

= = Aftermath = =

The British fleet 's arrival in New York set off a flurry of panic amongst the Loyalist population . The news of the defeat was also not received well in London . King George III wrote (well before learning of Cornwallis 's surrender) that " after the knowledge of the defeat of our fleet [...] I nearly think the empire ruined . "

The French success left them firmly in control of Chesapeake Bay , completing the encirclement of Cornwallis . In addition to capturing a number of smaller British vessels , de Grasse and Barras assigned their smaller vessels to assist in the transport of Washington 's and Rochambeau 's forces

from Head of Elk to Yorktown .

It was not until 23 September that Graves and Clinton learned that the French fleet in the Chesapeake numbered 36 ships . This news came from a dispatch sneaked out by Cornwallis on the 17 September , accompanied by a plea for help : " If you cannot relieve me very soon , you must be prepared to hear the worst . " After effecting repairs in New York , Admiral Graves sailed from New York on 19 October with 25 ships of the line and transports carrying 7 @, @ 000 troops to relieve Cornwallis . It was two days after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown . General Washington acknowledged to de Grasse the importance of his role in the victory : " You will have observed that , whatever efforts are made by the land armies , the navy must have the casting vote in the present contest . " The eventual surrender of Cornwallis led to peace two years later and British recognition of the independent United States of America .

Admiral de Grasse returned with his fleet to the West Indies . In a major engagement that ended Franco @-@ Spanish plans for the capture of Jamaica in 1782 , he was defeated and taken prisoner by Rodney in the Battle of the Saintes . His flagship Ville de Paris was lost at sea in a storm while being conducted back to England as part of a fleet commanded by Admiral Graves . Graves , despite the controversy over his conduct in this battle , continued to serve , rising to full admiral and receiving an Irish peerage .

= = Analysis = =

Many aspects of the battle have been the subject of both contemporary and historical debate , beginning right after the battle . On 6 September , Admiral Graves issued a memorandum justifying his use of the conflicting signals , indicating that " [when] the signal for the line of battle ahead is out at the same time with the signal for battle , it is not to be understood that the latter signal shall be rendered ineffectual by a too strict adherence to the former . " Hood , in commentary written on the reverse of his copy , observed that this eliminated any possibility of engaging an enemy who was disordered , since it would require the British line to also be disordered . Instead , he maintained , " the British fleet should be as compact as possible , in order to take the critical moment of an advantage opening ... " Others criticise Hood because he " did not wholeheartedly aid his chief " , and that a lesser officer " would have been court @-@ martialled for not doing his utmost to engage the enemy . "

One contemporary writer critical of the scuttling of the Terrible wrote that " she made no more water than she did before [the battle] " , and , more acidly , " If an able officer had been at the head of the fleet , the Terrible would not have been destroyed . " Admiral Rodney was critical of Graves ' tactics , writing , " by contracting his own line he might have brought his nineteen against the enemy 's fourteen or fifteen , [...] disabled them before they could have received succor , [... and] gained a complete victory . " Defending his own behaviour in not sending his full fleet to North America , he also wrote that " [i] f the admiral in America had met Sir Samuel Hood near the Chesapeake " , that Cornwallis 's surrender might have been prevented .

United States Navy historian Frank Chadwick believed that de Grasse could have thwarted the British fleet simply by staying put ; his fleet 's size would have been sufficient to impede any attempt by Graves to force a passage through his position . Historian Harold Larrabee points out that this would have exposed Clinton in New York to blockade by the French if Graves had successfully entered the bay ; if Graves did not do so , Barras (carrying the siege equipment) would have been outnumbered by Graves if de Grasse did not sail out in support .

= = Memorial = =

At the Cape Henry Memorial located at Joint Expeditionary Base East in Virginia Beach , Virginia , there is monument commemorating the contribution of de Grasse and his sailors to the cause of American independence . The memorial and monument are part of the Colonial National Historical Park and are maintained by the National Park Service .

= = Order of battle = =

Sources consulted (including de Grasse 's memoir , and works either dedicated to the battle or containing otherwise detailed orders of battle , like Larrabee (1964) and Morrissey (1997)) do not list per @-@ ship casualties for the French fleet . Larrabee reports the French to have suffered 209 casualties ; Bougainville recorded 10 killed and 58 wounded aboard Auguste alone .

The exact order in which the French lined up as they exited the bay is also uncertain . Larrabee notes that many observers wrote up different sequences when the line was finally formed , and that Bougainville recorded several different configurations .