

= HMS Alceste ( 1806 ) =

HMS Alceste was a 38 @-@ gun frigate of the Royal Navy . She was built at Rochefort in 1804 for the French Navy as the Minerve , an Armide @-@ class frigate . As part of a French squadron , anchored in the roads of the Île @-@ d 'Aix , in the spring of 1806 , she engaged HMS Pallas , then under Lord Cochrane . During the duel , the ships became entangled and ran aground but Cochrane , having spotted French reinforcements arriving , managed to free his ship and take off .

On 25 September 1806 , she was captured by the British and in March 1807 , brought into Royal Navy service as HMS Alceste . She continued to serve throughout the Napoleonic Wars and on 29 November 1811 , she led a British squadron that captured a French military convoy bound for Trieste , and in doing so , possibly changed the course of the war . In 1814 she was converted to a troopship and used to transport British soldiers to North America during the War of 1812 .

Following the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 , Alceste was chosen to carry Lord Amherst on his 1816 diplomatic mission to China , then on the return journey , she foundered on a reef in the Java Sea where , after the evacuation of her passengers and crew , she was plundered and burned by Malayan pirates .

= = Construction and armament = =

Alceste was built for the French Navy as the Minerve , an Armide @-@ Class 18 @-@ pounder / 40 @-@ gun frigate to a design by Pierre Rolland . She was built at Rochefort with construction starting in May 1804 . She was launched in September 1805 and finished in November . She was 152 feet 5 inches ( 46 @-@ 46 m ) along her gundeck with a 40 feet ( 12 m ) beam . With a depth in the hold of 12 feet 8 inches ( 3 @-@ 86 m ) , she had a capacity of just over 1 @-@ 097 tons BM . When first fitted out , Minerve carried twenty @-@ eight 18 pounders ( 8 @-@ 2 kg ) as her main battery , fourteen 32 pounders ( 15 kg ) carronades on her quarter @-@ deck , while her forecastle had two 9 pounders ( 4 @-@ 1 kg ) long guns and two 32 pounders ( 15 kg ) carronades .

= = French service = =

In April 1806 Minerve was commanded by Capitaine Jaques Collet and formed part of a squadron under Contre @-@ Amiral Zacharie Allemand . This French squadron comprised five ship @-@ of @-@ the @-@ line , five frigates and four smaller vessels , and was anchored under the shore batteries of the Île @-@ d 'Aix On the 25 April , HMS Pallas arrived . Pallas , under the command of Thomas Cochrane , had been sent by Sir Edward Thornbrough to count the enemy ships in the roadstead behind the island , and Minerve and three corvettes , were ordered to weigh anchor and meet the British frigate . As the French approached , Pallas discharged her guns and a small engagement followed in which none of the ships incurred much damage . Collet then spotted the frigate HMS Isis , the 16 @-@ gun Hazard and a cutter , and decided to seek shelter beneath the island 's guns . The British then left .

Pallas returned on 12 May with HMS Indefatigable and a 16 @-@ gun ship @-@ sloop , Kingfisher . The unfavourable winds , and the two large frigates and three brigs , Allemande had despatched , caused the British to withdraw . On 14 May Pallas was once more sighted and Allemande again ordered Minerve and three corvettes , the Lynx , Sylphe and Palinure to chase Cochrane off . Collett ordered all sail in the hope of catching Pallas before she could escape , but Cochrane was in no hurry to leave and even attempted to draw Minerve on by backing his topsails . Once in range , Pallas fired into the enemy , bringing down the main topsail yard of one of the smaller vessels , before making off among the shoals with Minerve in pursuit . By 1300 hrs , Minerve had come up on the leeward side of Pallas , whereupon Pallas fired into her and closed with the intention of boarding . Just at that moment , Minerve hit a sandbank and Pallas crashed into her with such force that her guns were jolted from their positions . Pallas then unleashed a devastating broadside .

Both ships were badly damaged in the collision but Pallas , drawing less water than Minerve , was able to free herself and take off , having spotted two forty @-@ gun French frigates , Armide and

Infatigable , approaching . Kingfisher , disobeyed her orders to keep offshore , and sailed in to take Pallas in tow , which had lost her jib @-@ boom , spritsail and stunsail yards , main topsail yard and fore topmast . The damage to Minerve was relatively minor , she was later re @-@ floated and taken to Rochefort for repair . The engagement on 14 May cost the lives of seven seamen aboard Minerve , with a further fourteen injured . The casualties aboard Pallas were light : one dead and five wounded . On 25 September 1806 , Minerve , Armide , Gloire and Infatigable were captured by a heavily armed , six @-@ ship squadron under Samuel Hood . Minerve surrendered to the 74 @-@ gun HMS Monarch . The French frigate Thémis and two French brigs managed to escape .

= = British service = =

The captured Minerve arrived at Plymouth on 26 October 1806 , and after languishing there for some months , was taken into service as HMS Alceste , and commissioned in March 1807 under Captain Murray Maxwell . She was refitted at Plymouth for British naval service from April to August 1807 , then in December that year she was sent to the Mediterranean . In the Action of 4 April 1808 Alceste , in company with HMS Mercury and HMS Grasshopper attacked a Spanish convoy off Rota , destroying two of the escorts and driving many of the merchants ashore . Seven were subsequently captured and sailed back out to sea by marines and sailors of the British ships .

On 22 May , Alceste encountered some French feluccas that were forced to seek refuge under the guns of the bay of Agay . Under cover of darkness , two boats from Alceste , one under Lieutenant Andrew Wilson , the other led by the ship 's master , Henry Bell , were sent in to attack the shore batteries . This was only partially successful ; Wilson was unable to achieve his objective , while Bell 's section managed to spike the guns of the second battery but only after taking heavy fire . Alceste stood out to sea for three days , and on the night of 25 May , Maxwell sent two armed boats to lay in wait in a rocky cove . The following morning Alceste set sail . The French , assuming Alceste had gone to attend to some other business , attempted to leave , but the two British boats lying in ambush attacked . Despite fierce resistance and fire from the guns on shore , four ships of the French convoy were captured .

On 21 June 1810 , the boats of Alceste and Topaze captured two vessels in the bay of Martino in Corsica . A landing party captured a battery of three guns that protected the entrance to the bay . They were able to capture and render the guns unserviceable , and kill or wound a number of the garrison . The British lost one man killed and two wounded in the action .

In 1811 , Alceste entered the Adriatic . On 4 ? 5 May , she and Belle Poule participated in a raid at Parenza ( Istria ) that destroyed a French 18 @-@ gun brig . They chased the brig into the harbour but could not get the ships close enough to bombard her . Instead , the two vessels landed 200 seamen and all their marines on an island nearby and brought on to it two 9 @-@ pounders and two howitzers , which they placed in one battery , and a field piece that they placed further away . Eventually , they and the French in Parenza engaged in five hours of mutual bombardment , during which the British were able to sink the brig . They then returned men and cannons to their ships . In the action , Belle Poule had one man killed and three wounded and Alceste had two men killed ; all casualties occurred onshore .

Alceste raided Ragusa , and at the Action of 29 November 1811 , Alceste led the British frigate squadron that outran and defeated a French military convoy carrying cannon . Alceste was stationed at the island of Lissa ( now Vis ) , together with the frigates Unité and Active , when word was received of a similar size French squadron heading north . The three British frigates immediately set sail , caught up with and engaged the French , capturing two of their frigates . The frigates contained more than 200 cannon , which were being transported to Trieste , a city in north @-@ east Italy on the border of the Balkan States . It has been suggested by British historian James Henderson that this action was a factor in Napoleon 's decision to change the direction of his planned eastward expansion in 1812 from the Balkans to Russia .

In late 1812 , Alceste was decommissioned and placed in ordinary at Deptford . Between February and July 1814 she was converted at Deptford into a troopship ; in this role , she was recommissioned in May 1814 under Commander Faniel Lawrence , and sailed with troops to North

America . Alceste left Pensacola on 8 December 1814 , in tandem with the 50 other vessels in Admiral Alexander Cochrane 's convoy .

= = = Diplomatic mission to China = = =

With the end of the war came a peace settlement which redefined Europe . It was the British government 's desire to strengthen ties with China and to that end planned to send an envoy to inform the emperor of the settlement and to profess Britain 's friendship . William Amherst was the able diplomat chosen for the job and Amherst , in turn , specifically requested Maxwell and the frigate Alceste . Therefore , in 1816 , Alceste was recommissioned under Captain Maxwell again , whose previous ship HMS Daedalus had been wrecked in 1813 . The journey out was uneventful ; Alceste left Spithead for China on 9 February 1816 with Amherst aboard , and after stopping at Madeira , Rio de Janeiro , the Cape of Good Hope , Anyer and Batavia , sailed through the Bangka Strait into the South China Sea . After a short stop to pay respects at Canton , Alceste passed the Straits of Formosa and hove to in the Bohai Sea on 28 July . There she met with the 10 gun brig sloop , Lyra , despatched earlier to herald the arrival of Britain 's ambassador .

= = = Exploration of Korea and Ryukyu Islands = = =

Having previously arranged to travel back overland from Peking and rendezvous with Alceste at Canton , Amherst was ferried to the mouth of the Hai River on 9 August . Amherst 's mission and return journey would take several weeks , thus providing Maxwell an opportunity to explore the area . Alceste headed north while Lyra , under the command of Lieutenant Basil Hall , was ordered to explore the south . The General Hewitt , an Indiaman chartered to carry gifts for the Emperor of China , was to take the centre channel . Alceste first undertook a survey of the Gulf of Liaodong , at that time virtually unknown to Europeans and after spending some time exploring the Liaodong Peninsula , Alceste proceeded southward to Jiaozhou Bay on the coast of Shandong , where she encountered the General Hewitt , and was later joined by Hall in the Lyra . Alceste and Lyra left the bay on 29 August and proceeded eastward toward the west coast of Korea , an area that had not been surveyed since the Jesuit missionaries visited in the 16th and 17th centuries . Maxwell hence found the coast to be some 130 miles further east than expected and while there also discovered the archipelago that forms the south western tip of the Korean peninsula . Maxwell then turned his attention the Loo Choo Islands , now known as the Ryukyu archipelago , dropping anchor in the Napakiang roads on the south west side of Okinawa on 16 September 1816 . After a six week stay , Alceste returned to China , via the southern end of the island of Taiwan , arriving at the mouth of the Pearl River on 2 November .

= = = Return to Whampoa = = =

Alceste required some repairs after an arduous journey in less than clement weather so Maxwell wasted no time in petitioning the viceroy of Canton for permission to travel up the Tigris to a secure anchorage , unaware that Amherst 's mission had been less than successful . The emperor 's reception towards the British had been tepid at best , having showed little interest in the affairs of Europe , so far away , and refusing to accept a gift from King George which he had thought less than sufficient . Having received an insulting message in response to his request , Maxwell decided to enter the river anyway but had not gone far when he was hailed by a local mandarin who threatened to have the batteries guarding the entrance sink Alceste if she went any further . Still in need of repairs and requiring navigation of the river to Whampoa to pick up Amherst , Maxwell told the mandarin that he would proceed in any event . Alceste made short work of the shore defences and 17 or so war junks sent to stop her , and continued up the river to Whampoa where she anchored and awaited the arrival of Lord Amherst and his suite . Having completed as much of the mission as possible , Amherst repaired on board Alceste which left Whampoa , on 21 January 1817 .

= = = Fate = = =

Alceste was a little undermanned , carrying a complement of 257 , including Lord Amherst and his entourage . It would have been usual practice to remove some of the guns in order to create more space for distinguished guests , and it is likely that this had been done . Fewer guns allowed for a smaller crew and this may have been a contributing factor . With waters that remain uncharted even today and the many shoals and reefs which rise so steeply that even modern equipment could fail to spot them , the South China Seas , with its frequent storms and typhoons remain some of the most dangerous waters in the world . Despite the continual use of a sounding lead , on 18 February 1817 , Alceste grounded on one of the many hidden reefs in the Java Sea . Maxwell ordered the anchor dropped to prevent the ship from slipping into deeper water , an undesirable situation if the hull had been breached , which indeed turned out to be the case . The pumps were unable to cope with the influx of water and the ship 's carpenter , Cheffy , reported that Alceste was beyond repair .

Three miles away was an island , known today as Pulau Liat , and Maxwell ordered the first lieutenant , Henry Parkyns Hoppner , to take Lord Amherst and his party off in two of the boats . The island 's thick vegetation prevented an accurate assessment of whether it was inhabited or not , and forced the crews to row a further three miles before finding a suitable landing spot between the mangroves . The rest of the ships company were evacuated in the remaining boats and a large raft . Because of the lack of provisions , and in particular , drinking water , it was decided that Hoppner would take Amherst and his embassy in two of the boats to Java , 200 miles to the south . Once there , a rescue could be initiated . A return journey to Java could not be accomplished in less than nine days and so further supplies would be required for the 200 remaining .

An expedition back to Alceste to see what could be salvaged was interrupted by the arrival of pirates in the form of Malay Dyaks . The unarmed expedition was obliged to return to the shore , and leave the pirates to plunder the wreck . Maxwell ordered the construction of a stockade and the improvisation of additional weapons to counter the threat of an attack . On 22 February , an armed party was sent out to reclaim the ship but before they could do so , the pirates set light to Alceste and made off . The wreck was completely destroyed by the fire which lasted throughout the night but , because the marooned had since managed to construct a well on the island , the impact was minimal . Even so , the following morning , Maxwell sent out a boat which managed to retrieve some barrels of flour , cases of wine and a cask of ale . At dawn on 26 February two proas and two canoes entered the cove but the second lieutenant , Hay , led a sortie in which one of the proas was boarded , four pirates were killed , five jumped into the sea and two were captured . The boat could not be brought in however as she was scuttled beforehand and sank quickly . Later that day the pirates returned in force and the following day further reinforcements arrived . The pirates did not attempt to land but behaved aggressively , firing their swivel guns towards the shore . Fourteen more proas arrived during the day , on 1 March , and several more during the night . With the provisions running low , the build @-@ up of pirates , and a rescue now overdue , Maxwell formulated a plan to capture sufficient proas to escape from the island . While the plan was being proposed , a sail was spotted on the horizon , heading toward the island . The appearance of this vessel , coupled with a sudden attack spearheaded by Alceste 's marines , caused the pirates to flee .

The rescue ship turned out to be the Ternate , an East Indiaman , despatched by Lord Amherst , on the day of his arrival in Batavia . The Ternate returned to Batavia with the castaways , where Amherst chartered another ship , Ceaser , for the journey to England . During a stop at St Helena , Maxwell met Napoleon , who remembered the action on the 29 November 1811 , when Alceste had captured La Pomone , and remarked , " ... your government must not blame you for the loss of Alceste , for you have taken one of my frigates . " Later , at his court martial , Maxwell was exonerated of all blame for the loss of Alceste .

Maxwell received much praise for his actions , and the British East India Company awarded him £ 1500 . He was knighted in 1818 .