

= Action of 9 September 1796 =

The Action of 9 September 1796 was an inconclusive minor naval engagement between small French Navy and British Royal Navy squadrons off northeastern Sumatra , near Banda Aceh , during the French Revolutionary Wars . The French squadron comprised six frigates engaged on a commerce raiding operation against British trade routes passing through captured parts of the Dutch East Indies , and posed a considerable threat to the weakened British naval forces in the region . The British force consisted of two 74 gun ships of the line hastily paired to oppose the eastward advance of the French squadron .

The French squadron , commanded by Contre amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey , had left their base on Île de France in July , cruising off Ceylon and Tranquebar before sailing eastwards . Their movements had so far been unopposed as British forces in the East Indies were concentrated at Simon 's Town in the west and Malacca in the east . After raiding the shipping at Banda Aceh on 1 September the squadron sailed eastwards to attack Penang . On 8 September , while the French were removing supplies from a captured British merchant ship east of Banda Aceh , two large sails were spotted . These were HMS Arrogant and HMS Victorious , sent to drive off the French before they could attack the scattered British shipping and ports in the region .

Although the British ships were substantially larger than any individual French vessel , the frigates were more numerous and more manoeuvrable . Neither side could afford to take significant damage in the battle , so each sought to drive the other off rather than achieve an outright victory . On 9 September Sercey 's frigates formed a line of battle , successfully engaging first Arrogant and then Victorious and inflicting damage on each while preventing them from supporting one another . The French frigates , particularly Vertu and Seine , also suffered and by late morning both sides disengaged , the British retiring to Madras for repairs while Sercey anchored at King 's Island in the Mergui Archipelago , eventually sheltering in Batavia .

= = Background = =

At the start of 1796 French and allied forces had been almost completely driven from the Indian Ocean , most of the colonies of the French allied Batavian Republic falling to British invasions during 1795 . The only significant French presence was on Île de France and a few other nearby islands , from which a squadron of two frigates periodically operated against British trade . The British were so confident of supremacy that they had split their forces , with a large squadron based at Simon 's Town in the Cape Colony of Southern Africa under Sir George Keith Elphinstone and a smaller dispersed force operating under Peter Rainier in the Dutch East Indies , based at the captured port of Malacca . The important trading ports of Calcutta , Madras and Bombay were largely undefended , as were the valuable trade routes which supported them .

On 4 March 1796 significant French reinforcements were dispatched when a squadron of four frigates and two corvettes sailed from Rochefort under the command of Contre amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey . Both corvettes were lost before the squadron had left the Bay of Biscay and frigate Cocarde forced to return to port after running aground . After resupplying at La Palma and joining with replacement frigate Vertu , the squadron enjoyed unimpeded progress , seizing several British and Portuguese ships , including two Indiamen in the South Atlantic and Western Indian Ocean . The squadron had not been dispatched primarily to increase the French military presence in the East Indies , but rather to enforce the National Convention 's decree that Île de France abolish slavery . The agricultural economy of the island depended on slavery to remain profitable , and the colonial committee had simply ignored the decree when it first arrived in 1795 . The matter was then taken up by the Committee for Public Safety , which sent agents Baco and Burnel to ensure the ruling was carried out , supported by 800 soldiers under General François Louis Magallon .

On arrival at Port Louis on 18 June , the agents were confronted by a large body of heavily armed militia opposed to the abolition of slavery . Although they ordered Magallon to attack the islanders , the general refused and the agents were sent back to sea in a small corvette , eventually returning

to Europe . Sercey remained in the East Indies , refitting his ships and joining his squadron to that already at Île de France . This force he divided , sending Preneuse and a corvette to patrol the Mozambique Channel . The remaining six frigates , comprising Vertu , Régénérée , Forte , Seine , Prudente and Cybèle , with the privateer schooner Alerte , Sercey took eastwards on 14 July , towards the Bay of Bengal .

Sercey was unaware of how scattered British forces were in the region , and sent Alerte to scout ahead after the squadron arrived off Ceylon . Captain Drieu of Alerte made the miscalculation of attacking a ship on 14 August which turned out to be the 28 @-@ gun British dispatch frigate HMS Carysfort , and on board Alerte the British captors discovered documents revealing the exact extent of Sercey 's strength and intentions . Carysfort 's captain was unable to warn any allied ships as his small frigate was the only British warship in the Bay of Bengal , and so he instead arranged for false information to be passed to Sercey regarding a fictional British battle squadron at Madras . This was sufficient to deter Sercey from lingering in the area , and after a raiding sweep along the coast to Tranquebar his squadron sailed eastwards once more .

On 1 September Sercey raided Banda Aceh , capturing a number of merchant ships and on 7 September seized the small merchant ship Favourite off the northeastern coast of Sumatra en route to attack the British port of Penang . The following morning , as his squadron transferred rice from the prize , two large sails appeared in the distance to the northeast . These sails belonged to the 74 @-@ gun British ships of the line HMS Arrogant under Captain Richard Lucas and HMS Victorious under Captain William Clark . These ships had been sent to the East Indies from the Cape at the start of August on orders from Elphinstone and were engaged in protecting British trade with China . When news reached Penang that Sercey was in the region , Lucas ordered Clark to join him in a search for the French in the Straits of Malacca .

= = Battle = =

Lucas first sighted the French at 06 : 00 on 8 September , approximately 24 nautical miles ( 44 km ) east of Point Pedro , the northeastern tip of Sumatra . By 10 : 00 Sercey had determined that the new arrivals were probably hostile and formed his frigates into a line of battle , tacking to investigate . Lucas and Clark conferred at 14 : 00 , Clark believing that two of the ships were French ships of the line while Lucas correctly insisted that they were six frigates , accompanied by the captured East Indiaman Triton . The captains agreed to pursue the French and bring them to battle when possible . At 14 : 30 , Forte determined that the approaching ships were British ships of the line and Sercey turned away , unwilling to risk suffering severe damage in a pointless engagement with two such powerful opponents . Sercey 's squadron attempted to seek shelter in coastal waters , closely pursued by Lucas ' ships ; by 21 : 30 the British were just 3 nautical miles ( 5 @.@ 6 km ) behind the French .

By the morning of 9 September the wind had dropped and the French frigates were sailing in line slowly eastwards along the northern coast of Sumatra , the British ships close behind . With battle inevitable , Sercey gave orders at 06 : 00 for his line to put about and seize the weather gage while Lucas led Arrogant on a path to intercept . At 07 : 25 Lucas opened fire on the lead French ship Vertu at the range of 700 yards ( 640 m ) . The British ship was able to fire two broadsides before Captain Lhermitte on Vertu could reply , the first French volley snatching away the ensign . Arrogant then progressively came under fire from the whole French line , as Seine , Forte and Cybèle passed , the more distant Régénérée and Prudente joining the fusillade . During this exchange of fire both Arrogant and Vertu suffered damage to their sails and rigging , the Arrogant temporarily unmaneuverable as the winds dropped almost completely .

Victorious was also hit , Captain Clark forced to retire wounded after being struck in the thigh by debris at 08 : 00 . At 08 : 30 the rearmost French ship , Prudente , passed out of range of Arrogant leaving the ship isolated . With Lucas unable to participate , Lieutenant William Waller on Victorious assumed command and ordered his ship to engage the French at 08 : 40 , a string of signal flags hoisted on Arrogant unreadable in the light winds . Victorious was soon surrounded by the French , with two frigates on the port bow and four on the port beam , all firing into the ship of the line from

approximately 900 yards ( 820 m ) . By 10 : 15 , when the wind suddenly returned , Victorious had been badly damaged . Using the wind to turn towards the distant Arrogant , Waller exposed his ship 's stern and was repeatedly raked . The winds remained unreliable , and Victorious took further damage for the next half @-@ hour , the French ships remaining outside the arcs of fire from the British ship .

The damage Vertu had taken early in the combat rendered Lhermitte unable to continue the action , and his ship gradually fell out of the line to the south . Captain Pierre Julien Tréhouart turned Cybèle away too , using sweeps to reach Vertu and take the ship under tow . With Vertu secured and Arrogant slowly coming back into range , Sercey ordered his squadron to turn away to the north at 10 : 55 , the last shots fired at long range from Victorious at 11 : 15 .

= = = 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 its 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 = =

Losses on both sides were heavy . Arrogant had been damaged early in the battle and lost seven killed and 27 wounded while Victorious which bore the brunt of the French attack , suffered 17 killed and 57 wounded , the latter including Clark . Neither British ship was in sufficient repair to continue the engagement ; Arrogant had several cannon dismounted and her sail 's and rigging were tattered . Victorious was less badly damaged , but had more than one in five of the crew unfit for duty . All of the French ships suffered damage and casualties , although Régénérée reported no losses in the aftermath . Vertu was damaged early on and took 24 casualties , Seine was hit by heavy fire later in the battle and lost 62 dead and wounded , with the captain among the former . The remainder of the squadron suffered lighter losses , with 12 on Prudente , 17 on Cybèle and 23 on Forte .

Lucas and Clark remained off Sumatra until basic repairs could be completed before Arrogant then took Victorious under tow , leading the damaged ship back to Penang and then Madras for repairs , arriving on 6 October . Sercey abandoned plans for an attack on Penang and sailed northwards to King 's Island in the Mergui Archipelago . There his ships underwent extensive repairs , some even replacing their lower masts . In October the squadron swept eastwards to the Ceylon coast before turning back west towards Batavia , where Sercey hoped the supply depots would provide more support than those on Île de France . The squadron remained at Batavia throughout the winter , ceding control of the Indian Ocean trade routes to the British .

The action has been described as inconclusive by British historian C. Northcote Parkinson as neither side could achieve a decisive result . Parkinson is also scathing of his criticism of both Clark and Waller , accusing them of failing to properly to prepare for battle or effectively manoeuvre their ship under fire . During the battle neither side had actually sought a decisive result , both unwilling to risk damage which would jeopardise their mission . Sercey 's orders were to raid British trade routes , not to engage heavy warships and suffer the consequent damage : the battle severely curtailed his opportunities to prey on British merchant shipping in the East Indies during 1796 . Lucas sought to block Sercey 's passage through the Malacca Straits , but was aware that his ships , though large and powerful , were outnumbered and outgunned in the engagement , particularly given the size of the main French line , composed of ships with batteries of 18 @-@ pounder long guns and including Forte , one of the most massive frigates then at sea . William James considers that had the winds been more favourable Lucas might have been able to cut off and capture at least two French frigates , but had Sercey attempted a boarding action against the ships of the line his more numerous crews would probably have successfully seized them .