

= Action of 30 May 1798 =

The Action of 30 May 1798 was a minor naval engagement between a small British squadron and a small French squadron off the coast of Normandy , France during the French Revolutionary Wars . A British blockadeing force , which had been conducting patrols in the region in the aftermath of the battle of St Marcou earlier in the month , encountered two French vessels attempting to sail unnoticed between Le Havre and Cherbourg . Closing with the French , the British commander Sir Francis Laforey sought to bring the French ships to battle as they attempted to turn back to Le Havre before the British squadron could attack . The French were unable to escape , and Laforey 's ship , the fifth rate HMS Hydra , engaged the French corvette Confiante , while two smaller British ships chased the Vésuve .

After a brief exchange of fire , their crews ran both French ships onshore close to the mouth of the River Dives , where several of the landing barges that had survived the attack on the British @-@ held Îles Saint @-@ Marcouf were sheltering . Confiante was badly damaged and boarding parties from Hydra and the other ships were able to board and burn her the following morning . Vésuve had suffered less than the Confiante and troops onshore were able to protect her from further attack until her crew could bring her into the nearby harbour of Sallenelles . There she was repaired and eventually she returned to Le Havre .

= = Background = =

By 1798 the British Royal Navy had successfully contained the French Navy within its own harbours , employing a strategy of close blockade to ensure dominance at sea during the French Revolutionary Wars . The strategy was particularly effective in the English Channel , where the proximity of British bases and the importance in limiting the movements of the French invasion forces stationed around Boulogne focused British attention on the Normandy coast . This was essential to prevent the concentration of a large force of invasion barges that had been constructed at various harbours under the guidance of a Captain Muskein . To improve the Royal Navy 's ability to observe French movements on the Normandy coast , a force under the command of Captain Sir Sidney Smith seized , garrisoned , and fortified the uninhabited Îles Saint @-@ Marcouf in 1795 .

During the spring of 1798 , Muskein concentrated over 50 of the landing barges in Saint @-@ Vaast @-@ la @-@ Hougue and on 6 May launched an attack on the Îles Saint @-@ Marcouf while a combination of wind and tide prevented the blockade squadron from intervening . The fortified islands were too well @-@ defended however and over 900 French soldiers died in the ensuing battle before the French abandoned the attack . The French subsequently dispersed the remaining landing barges to various ports on the Normandy coast . In response the Royal Navy increased its patrols in the region with the intention of intercepting the convoys and destroying the barges . French movements along the coast were not solely confined to landing barges : on 29 May 1798 two warships , the 20 or 24 @-@ gun Confiante under captain de vaisseau Etienne Pévrieu , and the 20 @-@ gun Vésuve under lieutenant de vaisseau Jean @-@ Baptiste @-@ Louis Lecolier , sailed from Le Havre , travelling westwards across the Baie de la Seine to Cherbourg , accompanied by a small , armed cutter .

= = Battle of 30 May = =

= = = Engagement at sea = = =

On the morning of 30 May , a British squadron sailing off La Havre spotted the French ships pulling to the west and gave chase , Captain Laforey leading in the 38 @-@ gun HMS Hydra , followed by the bomb vessel HMS Vesuvius , under Captain Robert Fitzgerald , and the 12 @-@ gun cutter HMS Trial , under Lieutenant Henry Garrett . Discovering the British in pursuit , Pévrieux ordered his squadron to retreat towards the shore , tacking in front of Hydra and opening an ineffective fire at

long range . Laforey continued his approach , and at 06 : 00 successfully tacked Hydra into a position between Confiante and Vésuve , which had turned back towards the shore . Although the British frigate came under fire from both French ships , their attacks had little impact . Laforey was able to concentrate his broadside against Vésuve and rapidly forced the French corvette to turn inshore , pursued by Vesuvius and Trial . Laforey then set off in pursuit of Confiante , which was attempting to turn back towards Le Havre . The French cutter was unable to escape the British pursuit and its crew deliberately drove it ashore near the mouth of the Dives River .

At 06 : 30 , Hydra caught up with Pevrieux on the Confiante and began a heavy fire , which the French warship returned when possible . The exchange continued for 45 minutes until 07 : 15 , when Confiante , having suffered serious damage , drove aground on a sandbank near Beuzeval , a village a short distance to the west of the mouth of the Dives . As Confiante struck the sandbank , her mainmast collapsed , rendering further manoeuvre under hostile fire impossible . Vésuve too drove ashore to avoid the British attack , Lieutenant Lecolier managing to beach his ship within the Dives estuary itself . As the rising tide brought the corvette off the beach , Lecolier made a brief attempt to escape westwards towards Caen , but Trial and Vesuvius were alert and drove Vésuve back to the shore . There the two small British vessels opened up a distant fire on the corvette , as did Hydra to the west against Confiante . At 09 : 30 , the falling tide forced the British ships to retreat off @-@ shore , Laforey gathering his vessels approximately 5 miles (8 @.@ 0 km) northeast of the beached French convoy .

= = = Attack by boats = = =

During the day , the French strengthened the positions of both battered ships , soldiers from the surrounding area gathering on the beaches to deter any boat attacks on the grounded vessels . Among the soldiers were men taken from several of Muskein 's landing barges that were sheltering in the Dives River . These troops were identified by Trial , which briefly closed with Confiante to determine her condition and was fired on by the remaining guns in operation on the frigate . With their evacuation covered from the shore , most of the crew were removed from Confiante , including all the wounded . The French eventually abandoned the wrecked corvette in the evening . Vésuve was in better condition and remained well protected . Her crew shored up their vessel at low tide to prevent her falling over and prepared to heave the ship off as the tide rose . Due to the strong French military presence , Laforey decided to delay any operation against the beached vessels until circumstances were more favourable .

At 10 : 00 on the morning of 31 May , Laforey sent the boats from his squadron inshore to attack the grounded Confiante . Coming alongside the wreck at 12 : 45 , the British boarding party , under Lieutenants George Acklom and William J. Simonds , found no one alive on the ship , but counted a large number of French dead still on board . Removing the French colours and paperwork , the boarding party started fires in the bow and stern of the corvette before withdrawing , despite a steady but ineffective musket fire from French troops overlooking the beach and a force of cavalry moving along the shore . The fire rapidly destroyed Confiante and the British boarding party retired without casualties .

As the British attack proceeded against Confiante , the crew of Vésuve succeeded in refloating her and soon had their ship anchored under the protection of gun batteries at Sallenelles . These defences were augmented by additional batteries set up by 200 soldiers under Captain Muskein , drawn from the barges that had been trapped in the town by the British blockade . By the time Confiante had been destroyed , the mouth of the Dives had been heavily fortified and even the arrival of the 38 @-@ gun frigate HMS Diamond under Captain Sir Richard Strachan on 1 June was insufficient to counterbalance French numerical superiority . Eventually Laforey was forced to retire from the blockade of Sallenelles , and while he was absent Vésuve managed to get underway and reach Le Havre without further incident .

= = Aftermath = =

French casualties in the engagement are uncertain due to the circumstances of *Confiante* 's destruction , but based on Acklom 's report from the boarding party they were believed to be heavy . British losses were negligible , with not one man killed or seriously wounded and only minor damage inflicted on *Hydra* and none on the smaller vessels . The conduct of Lieutenant Lecolier was the subject of much criticism in France after the battle ; in the French history *Victories et Conquêtes* , Lecolier was accused of failing to support Pevrieux and grounding his ship while the outcome of the battle was still undecided . British historian William James is less critical of Lecolier , focusing much of the blame for the French defeat on the more senior Pevrieux . The restriction of French movement along their own coastline had serious effects for the development of the French forces in the region and played a significant role in the failure of the French to pose a realistic invasion threat to Britain .