

= Battle of Cape Henry =

The Battle of Cape Henry was a naval battle in the American War of Independence which took place near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay on 16 March 1781 between a British squadron led by Vice Admiral Mariot Arbuthnot and a French fleet under Admiral Charles René Dominique Sochet , Chevalier Destouches . Destouches , based in Newport , Rhode Island , had sailed for the Chesapeake as part of a joint operation with the Continental Army to oppose the British army of Brigadier General Benedict Arnold that was active in Virginia .

Admiral Destouches was asked by General George Washington to take his fleet to the Chesapeake to support military operations against Arnold by the Marquis de Lafayette . Sailing on 8 March , he was followed two days later by Admiral Arbuthnot , who sailed from eastern Long Island . Arbuthnot 's fleet outsailed that of Destouches , reaching the Virginia Capes just ahead of Destouches on 16 March . After manoeuvring for several hours , the battle was joined , and both fleets suffered some damage and casualties without losing any ships . However , Arbuthnot was positioned to enter the Chesapeake as the fleets disengaged , frustrating Destouches ' objective . Destouches returned to Newport , while Arbuthnot protected the bay for the arrival of additional land troops to reinforce General Arnold .

= = Background = =

In December 1780 , British General Sir Henry Clinton sent Brigadier General Benedict Arnold (who had changed sides to the British the previous September) with about 1 @, @ 700 troops to Virginia to do some raiding and to fortify Portsmouth . General George Washington responded by sending the Marquis de Lafayette south with a small army to oppose Arnold . Seeking to trap Arnold between Lafayette 's army and a French naval detachment , Washington asked the French admiral Destouches , the commander of the fleet at Newport , Rhode Island for help . Destouches was wary of the threat posed by the slightly larger British North American fleet anchored at Gardiner 's Bay off the eastern end of Long Island , and was reluctant to help .

A storm in early February damaged some of Arbuthnot 's fleet , which prompted Destouches to send a squadron of three ships south shortly after . When they reached the Chesapeake , the British ships supporting Arnold moved up the shallow Elizabeth River , where the French ships were unable to follow . The French fleet returned to Newport , having as their only success the capture of HMS Romulus , a heavy frigate that was one of several ships sent by the British to investigate the French movements . This modest success , and the encouragement of General Washington , prompted Destouches to embark on a full @-@ scale operation . On 8 March , Washington was in Newport when Destouches sailed with his entire fleet , carrying 1 @, @ 200 troops for use in land operations when they arrived in the Chesapeake .

Vice Admiral of the White Mariot Arbuthnot , the British fleet commander in North America , was aware that Destouches was planning something , but did not learn of Destouches ' sailing until 10 March , and immediately led his fleet out of Gardiner Bay in pursuit . He had the speed advantage of copper @-@ clad vessels and a favourable wind , and reached Cape Henry on 16 March , slightly ahead of Destouches .

= = Battle = =

Although the two fleets both had eight ships in their lines , the British had an advantage in firepower : the 90 @-@ gun HMS London was the largest ship of either fleet (compared to the 84 @-@ gun Duc de Bourgogne) , while the French fleet also included the recently captured 44 @-@ gun Romulus , the smallest vessel on either line . When Arbuthnot spotted the French fleet to his northeast at 6 am on 16 March , they were about 40 nmi (74 km) east @-@ northeast of Cape Henry . Arbuthnot came about , and Destouches ordered his ships to form a line of battle heading west , with the wind . Between 8 and 9 am the winds began shifting , but visibility remained poor , and the two fleets manoeuvred for several hours , each seeking the advantage of the weather gage

. By 1 pm the wind had stabilised from the northeast , and Arbuthnot , with superior seamanship , was coming up on the rear of the French line as both headed east @-@ southeast , tacking against the wind . Destouches , in order to escape this position , gave orders to wear ship in sequence , and brought his line around in front of the advancing British line . With this manoeuvre he surrendered the weather gage (giving Arbuthnot the advantage in determining the attack) , but it also positioned his ships relative to the wind such that he could open his lower gun decks in the heavy seas , which the British could not do without the risk of water washing onto the lower decks .

Arbuthnot responded to the French manoeuvre by ordering his fleet to wear . When the ships in the van of his line made the maneuver , they were fully exposed to the French line 's fire , and consequently suffered significant damage . Robust , Europe , and Prudent were virtually unmanageable due to damage to their sails and rigging . Arbuthnot kept the signal for maintaining the line flying , and the British fleet thus lined up behind the damaged vessels . Destouches at this point again ordered his fleet to wear in succession , and his ships raked the damaged British ships once more , taking off London 's topsail yard before pulling away to the east .

= = Aftermath = =

French casualties were 72 killed and 112 wounded , while the British suffered 30 killed and 73 wounded . Arbuthnot pulled into Chesapeake Bay , thus frustrating the original intent of Destouches ' mission , while the French fleet returned to Newport . After transports delivered 2 @, @ 000 men to reinforce Arnold , Arbuthnot returned to New York . He resigned his post as station chief due to age and infirmity in July and left for England , ending a stormy , difficult , and unproductive relationship with General Clinton .

General Washington , unhappy that the operation had failed , wrote a letter that was mildly critical of Destouches . This letter was intercepted and published in an English newspaper , prompting a critical response to Washington by the Comte de Rochambeau , the French army commander at Newport . The Comte de Barras , who arrived in May to take command of the Newport station , justified Destouches ' failure to pursue the attack : " It is a principle in war that one should risk much to defend one 's positions , and very little to attack those of the enemy . " Naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan points out that " this aversion from risks [...] goes far to explain the French want of success in the war . "

Lafayette , when he learned of the French failure , turned back north to rejoin Washington . Washington then ordered Lafayette to stay in Virginia , having learned of the reinforcements sent to Arnold . Although the French operation to support Lafayette was unsuccessful , the later naval operations by the Comte de Grasse that culminated in the French naval victory in the September 1781 Battle of the Chesapeake paved the way for a successful naval blockade and land siege of Lord Cornwallis ' army at Yorktown , Virginia .

The battle has been memorialized by American singer @-@ songwriter Todd Snider in " The Ballad of Cape Henry " . Although there is a marker commemorating the Battle of the Chesapeake at the Cape Henry Memorial in Virginia , there is no recognition of this battle at the site .

= = Order of battle = =

Basic information (ship names and gun counts) are provided by Morrissey unless otherwise cited . The names of ship captains are provided by Mahan unless otherwise cited , and casualty figures are provided by Lapeyrouse . Mahan and Lapeyrouse disagree on the casualty count ; Mahan reports that the British had 30 killed and 73 wounded , and that the French had 72 killed and 112 wounded .

Sources also disagree on which ship carried Destouches and his flag . The English @-@ language sources (Mahan , p . 492 , and Morrissey , p . 51) list his flag on board the Neptune , while Lapeyrouse (p . 170) lists the Duc de Bourgogne . The Duc de Bourgogne was the flagship of Destouches ' predecessor , the Chevalier de Ternay , during which time Destouches was captain of the Neptune ; Destouches may have moved to the Duc de Bourgogne upon Ternay 's death .

= = In Popular Culture = =

Americana singer songwriter Todd Snider recorded The Ballad Of Cape Henry on his 2008 album Peace Queer based upon the naval engagement and included the following lyrics :

Other ships

Guadelupe (frigate , 28 , Hugh Robinson)

Pearl (frigate , 32 , George Montagu)

Iris (frigate , 32 , George Dawson)

Medea (frigate , 28 , Henry Duncan)

Other ships

Hermione (frigate , 36 , Latouche)

Gentille (frigate , 32 , M. de Maingand)

Fantasque (14 , M. de Vaudoré)