

= Nathaniel Dance =

Sir Nathaniel Dance ( 20 June 1748 ? 25 March 1827 ) was an officer of the Honourable East India Company who had a long and varied career on merchant vessels , making numerous voyages to India and back with the fleets of East Indiamen . He was already aware of the risks of the valuable ships he sailed on being preyed on by foreign navies , having been captured by a Franco @-@ Spanish fleet in 1780 during the East Indies campaign of the American War of Independence . His greatest achievement came during the Napoleonic Wars , when having been appointed commodore of one of the company 's fleets , he came across a French squadron under Rear @-@ Admiral Comte de Linois , which was raiding British shipping in the area . Through skilful seamanship and aggressive tactics he fooled the French commander into thinking that the British convoy was escorted by powerful naval forces , and the French decided not to risk attacking the convoy . Dance compounded the deception by taking his lightly armed merchants and chasing the French away , despite the considerable disparity of force . Having saved the convoy from almost certain destruction , Dance was hailed as a hero , lavishly rewarded with money and a knighthood , and spent the last years of his life in comfortable retirement .

= = Family and early life = =

Dance was born in London on 20 June 1748 , the son of James Dance and his wife Elizabeth . James Dance was a successful lawyer of the city , but shortly after the birth of Nathaniel , he abandoned his wife to live with an actress , and in time established himself as a successful actor and playwright in Drury Lane . Elizabeth Dance and her family were instead cared for by James 's father , and Nathaniel 's paternal grandfather , George Dance the Elder , a prominent architect for the City of London . Nathaniel lived with his grandfather until 1759 , when he went to sea under the patronage of Nathaniel Smith , a high @-@ ranking official in the Honourable East India Company . With Smith 's support , Dance rose through the ranks of the service , by 1780 having made eight voyages to India , as well as one to the Mediterranean and one to the West Indies . While making his ninth voyage to India as first officer on Royal George when a combined Spanish and French fleet captured his ship in the Action of 9 August 1780 . Dance was taken to Spain , where he spent six months on parole . He became commander of the Lord Camden in January 1787 , making another four voyages to India aboard her , before being appointed commander of a new ship , the Earl Camden , in which he sailed to China in January 1803 .

= = Voyage home = =

The Earl Camden sailed from Canton with the rest of the fleet on 31 January 1804 , bound for England . By virtue of his seniority Dance was appointed commodore of the fleet of 11 " country " ships , and 16 East Indiamen . The fleet that had been assembled was the richest to date , carrying cargoes with an estimated value of £ 8 million , ( approximately £ 635 million in present @-@ day terms ) . Dance had been taken seriously ill at Bombay during the outward voyage , but had recovered in time to sail with the convoy . The fleet did not have any naval escorts , and though the East Indiamen were heavily armed for merchants , carrying nominal batteries of between 30 and 36 guns , they were no match for disciplined and professional naval forces . Not all of their listed armament was always carried , but to give the illusion of greater strength , fake gunports were often painted on the hulls , in the hope of distant observers mistaking them for 64 @-@ gun ships of the Royal Navy . By the time the fleet approached the Strait of Malacca on 14 February , Dance 's convoy had swelled to include 16 East Indiamen , 11 country ships , a Portuguese merchant ship from Macau and a vessel from Botany Bay in Australia . Although the HEIC had provided the small , armed brig Ganges as an escort , this vessel could only dissuade pirates ; it could not hope to confront a French warship . As they neared the entrance to the straits suspicious sails were sighted in the south west . Dance sent some of his ships to investigate , and it was soon discovered that this was Linois 's squadron , consisting of the 74 @-@ gun Marengo , the two heavy frigates Sémillante

and Belle Poule , the corvette Berceau , and the Dutch brig Aventurier .

= = = The battle = = =

Having ascertained the identity of the ships Dance signalled for his merchants to form the line of battle , and continued their heading , while the French closed , but made no move to attack . Dance used the delay to gather his ships together so the stronger East Indiamen stood between the French and the weaker country ships . The merchants continued on towards the straits , followed by Linois , who was trying to gauge the strength of the convoy . There were more ships in the convoy than he had expected , and taken in by Dance 's manoeuvres and the painted gunports , Linois suspected that several warships were escorting them . He seemed to be confirmed in his suspicions when at dawn on 15 February , both forces raised their colours . Dance ordered the brig Ganges and the four lead ships to hoist blue ensigns , while the rest of the convoy raised red ensigns . By the system of national flags then in use in British ships , this implied that the ships with blue ensigns were warships attached to the squadron of Admiral Peter Rainier , while the others were merchant ships under their protection .

With the French still appearing reluctant to attack on the morning of 16 February , Dance ordered his ships to increase their speed by breaking into a sailing formation . This had the effect of making the convoy appear less intimidating and Linois decided to attack . By the afternoon the French were observed to be moving to cut off the rearmost ships of the convoy . Dance promptly hoisted colours , and ordered his largest ships , led by the East Indiamen Royal George , Ganges and his own ship , Earl Camden , to come about and close on the French . Advancing under full sail , they endured the fire of the French as they closed , before firing broadsides at close range . At this the French abandoned their attack , turned , and fled under a press of sail . Dance hoisted the signal for a general chase and his merchant fleet pursued the French squadron for two hours , before Dance broke off and returned on his original heading . The fleet resumed their course towards the Malacca Strait , and having met two British ships of the line from Admiral Peter Rainier 's fleet on 28 February , were escorted as far as Saint Helena . There the convoy met with other British merchants , and were escorted to Britain by Royal Navy warships , arriving in August 1804 .

= = Rewards = =

The achievement of a convoy of merchants not only escaping without loss from a French squadron , but going so far as to attack , drive off , and then pursue their would @-@ be predators , was widely hailed as a signal victory .

The Naval Chronicle declared :

We cannot sufficiently express our opinion of the coolness , intrepidity , and skill , with which the Commander of this Fleet , unaccustomed as he was to the practice of naval engagements , provided against every emergency , and prepared his plans , either for attack or defence , as the manoeuvres of the French Admiral might render it expedient for him to adopt either the one of the other . His conduct was worthy of the experience and science of our most approved and veteran Admirals , while the ardour and promptitude with which his orders were obeyed and his plans executed by the several Captains under his command , may have been rivalled , but can scarcely be exceeded in the most renowned of our naval exploits .

Dance received £ 5 @,@ 000 from the Bombay Insurance Company ( approximately £ 338 @,@ 000 in present @-@ day terms ) , a pension of £ 500 a year ( approximately £ 34 @,@ 000 a year in present @-@ day terms ) , plate worth 200 guineas from the Honourable East India Company , a ceremonial sword worth £ 100 , and a silver vase . His captains were also rewarded . Captain Timmins of the Royal George received £ 1000 , a sword and plate , while the other captains received £ 500 , and a sword and plate , with money being paid to the officers and seaman under their command , with an ordinary seaman receiving £ 6 ( approximately £ 500 @.@ 00 in present @-@ day terms ) .

Dance himself credited the actions of those under his command as being largely responsible for the

victory , writing in reply to the award from the Bombay Insurance Company :

Placed , by the adventitious circumstances of seniority of service and absence of convoy , in the chief command of the fleet intrusted to my care , it has been my good fortune to have been enabled , by the firmness of those by whom I was supported , to perform my trust not only with fidelity , but without loss to my employers . Public opinion and public rewards have already far outrun my deserts ; and I cannot but be sensible that the liberal spirit of my generous countrymen has measured what they are pleased to term their grateful sense of my conduct , rather by the particular utility of the exploit , than by any individual merit I can claim .

Dance received a knighthood and went into a comfortable retirement , dying at Enfield on 25 March 1827 at the age of 78 .