

= Battle of Pulo Aura =

The Battle of Pulo Aura was a minor naval engagement of the Napoleonic Wars , fought on 14 February 1804 , in which a large convoy of Honourable East India Company ( HEIC ) East Indiamen , well @-@ armed merchant ships , intimidated , drove off and chased a powerful French naval squadron . Although the French force was much stronger than the British convoy , Commodore Nathaniel Dance 's aggressive tactics persuaded Contre @-@ Admiral Charles @-@ Alexandre Linois to retire after only a brief exchange of shot . Dance then chased the French warships until his convoy was out of danger , whereupon he resumed his passage towards British India . Linois later claimed that the unescorted British merchant fleet was defended by eight ships of the line , a claim criticised by contemporary officers and later historians .

The battle occurred during an extended commerce raiding operation by a French squadron led by Linois in the ship of the line Marengo . Linois had sailed to the Indian Ocean in 1803 before the declaration of war , under orders to install garrisons in the French and Dutch colonies in the region and to prey on lightly defended British merchant shipping . One of the richest and most significant targets was the " China Fleet " , an annual convoy of East Indiamen from China and other Far Eastern ports that carried millions of pounds worth of trade goods . Although these large vessels were accompanied by numerous smaller merchant ships , news of the outbreak of war had only just arrived in the Pacific and the only warship available to defend the fleet was the small HEIC armed brig Ganges . Dutch informants notified Linois of the fleet 's destination and date of departure from Canton while he was anchored at Batavia on Java , and he sailed in search of the convoy on 28 December 1803 , eventually discovering it in early February .

Although no warships protected the convoy , Commodore Dance knew that lookouts could , from a distance , mistake a large East Indiaman for a ship of the line . He raised flags that indicated that his fleet included part of the Royal Navy squadron operating in the Indian Ocean at the time and formed into a line of battle . Although Linois 's ships were clearly superior , the British reaction unnerved him and he quickly broke off combat . Dance continued his ruse , pursuing Linois for two hours until the body of the convoy was safe . King George III knighted Dance for his courage and various mercantile and patriotic organisations awarded him large sums of money , while both Linois 's own officers and the Emperor Napoleon personally castigated the French admiral for his failure to press the attack against a weaker and extremely valuable enemy . Although he remained in command of the squadron for another two years and had some minor success against undefended merchant ships , he suffered a string of defeats and inconclusive engagements against weaker British naval forces . Ironically , Linois was captured at the Action of 13 March 1806 by a numerically superior British battle squadron that he mistook for a merchant convoy .

= = Background = =

During the Napoleonic Wars , the British economy depended on its ability to trade with the British Empire , particularly the valuable colonies in British India . The intercontinental trade was conducted by the governors of India , the Honourable East India Company ( HEIC ) , using their fleet of large , well @-@ armed merchant vessels known as East Indiamen . These ships were of between 500 and 1200 nominal tons burthen ( bm ) and could carry up to 36 guns for defence against pirates , privateers and small warships . They were not , however , capable under normal circumstances of fighting off an enemy frigate or ship of the line . Their guns were usually of inferior design , and their crew smaller and less well trained than those on a naval ship . The East Indiamen sought to ensure the safety of their cargo and passengers , not defeat enemy warships in battle . Despite these disadvantages , the size of East Indiamen meant that from a distance they appeared quite similar to a small ship of the line , a deception usually augmented by paintwork and dummy cannon . At the Bali Strait Incident of 28 January 1797 an unescorted convoy of East Indiamen had used this similarity to intimidate a powerful French frigate squadron into withdrawing without a fight . In February 1799 an attack by a combined French @-@ Spanish squadron on the assembled convoy at Macau was driven off in the Macau Incident without combat by the small Royal Navy escort

squadron .

The East Indiamen would gather at ports in India and the Far East and from there set out for Britain in large convoys , often carrying millions of pounds worth of trade goods . The journey would usually take six months and the ships would subsequently return carrying troops and passengers to augment the British forces stationed in India . " Country ships " , smaller merchant vessels chartered for local trade , sometimes independently from the HEIC , would often join the convoys . To protect their ships from the depredations of pirates , the HEIC also operated its own private navy of small armed vessels . In combination , these ships were an effective deterrent against smaller raiders , but were no match for a professional warship .

Understanding the importance of the Indian Ocean trade and seeking to threaten it from the start of the inevitable war , First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte ordered a squadron to sail for India in March 1803 . This force was under the command of Contre @-@ Admiral Charles @-@ Alexandre Durand Linois and consisted of the ship of the line Marengo and three frigates . Linois operated from the island base of Île de France with orders to attack British shipping once war had begun . Sailing initially to Pondicherry in India , Linois had a close encounter with a British squadron under Rear @-@ Admiral Peter Rainier during July , but was at Île de France in August when news arrived that the Napoleonic Wars had started on 16 May . Determined to fortify the French raiding bases in the region , Linois landed troops and supplies at Réunion and Batavia . During the operation he despatched the frigate Atalante to Muscat , captured numerous individual country ships , and burned the British trading post of Bencoolen . On 10 December he anchored at Batavia for the winter . Shortly thereafter , informants passed to Batavia the composition and date of departure of the British " China Fleet " , leading Linois to set out to intercept it . On 28 December , Linois 's squadron ? consisting of Marengo , frigates Belle Poule and Sémillante , the corvette Berceau and the Dutch brig Aventurier ? departed Batavia . The ships carried six months worth of provisions as Linois had anticipated an extended patrol in the approaches to the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea .

The China Fleet was a large annual British merchant convoy that gathered at Canton in the Pearl River during the winter before sailing for Britain , via India . As the convoy passed through the East Indies , it was joined by vessels sailing from other European ports in the region on the route to India , until it often numbered dozens of ships . The 1804 fleet departed in late January , and by the time it reached the approaches to the Strait of Malacca it had swelled to include 16 East Indiamen , 11 country ships , a Portuguese merchant ship from Macau and a vessel from Botany Bay in New South Wales . Although the HEIC had provided the small , armed brig Ganges as an escort , this vessel could only dissuade pirates ; it could not hope to compete with a French warship . There was no military escort : news of the outbreak of war had reached Canton before reinforcements had arrived from the squadron in India . Spies based in Canton had passed the composition and date of departure of the China Fleet to Linois in Batavia , but the Dutch informants at Canton had also passed on false reports that Royal Navy warships were accompanying the convoy , reports that may have been deliberately placed by British authorities . The convoy was an immensely valuable prize , its cargo of tea , silk and porcelain valued at over £ 8 million in contemporary values ( the equivalent of £ 600 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 as of 2016 ) . Also on board were 80 Chinese plants ordered by Sir Joseph Banks for the royal gardens and carried in a specially designed plant room . The HEIC Select Committee in Canton had been very concerned for the safety of the unescorted convoy , and had debated delaying its departure . The various captains had been consulted , including Henry Meriton , who in his ship Exeter had captured a frigate during the Action of 4 August 1800 , a disastrous French attack on a convoy of East Indiamen off Brazil . Meriton advised that the convoy was powerful enough in both appearance and reality to dissuade any attack . He was opposed by John Farquharson of Alfred , who considered that the crews of East Indiamen were so badly trained that they would be unable to mutually defend one another if faced with a determined enemy . Eventually the Committee decided that it could delay the convoy no longer and awarded command to the most experienced captain , Commodore Nathaniel Dance ? an officer with over 45 years service at sea ? in the East Indiaman Earl Camden .

= = Battle = =

At 08 : 00 on 14 February 1804 , with the island of Pulo Aura within sight to the south @-@ west near the eastern entrance to the Straits of Malacca , the Indiaman Royal George raised a signal describing three sail approaching the convoy from the direction of the island . This was Linois 's squadron , which had been cruising in the area for the previous month in anticipation of the convoy 's arrival . Dance ordered the brig Ganges and the Indiamen Alfred , Royal George , Bombay Castle and Hope to approach the strange vessels and investigate , rapidly discovering that they were enemy warships . By 13 : 00 , Dance had readied his guns and reformed his convoy , with the large Indiamen formed up in line of battle to receive the French attack as if they were warships . During the late afternoon , Linois 's squadron fell in behind the slow line of merchant ships and Dance expected an immediate attack , but Linois was cautious and merely observed the convoy , preferring to wait until the following morning before engaging the enemy . Dance made use of the delay to gather the smaller country ships on the opposite side of his line from the French , the brig Ganges shepherding them into position and collecting volunteers from their crews to augment the sailors on board the Indiamen . Linois later excused his delay in attacking the merchant convoy by citing the need for caution :

If the bold front put on by the enemy in the daytime had been intended as a ruse to conceal his weakness , he would have profited by the darkness of the night to endeavour to conceal his escape ; and in that case should have taken advantage of his manoeuvres . But I soon became convinced that this security was not feigned ; three of his ships constantly kept their lights up , and the fleet continued to lie to , in order of battle , throughout the night . This position facilitated my gaining the wind , and enabled me to observe the enemy closely .

At dawn on 15 February , both the British and French forces raised their colours . Dance hoped to persuade Linois that his ships included some fully armed warships and he therefore 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 Rainier , while the others were merchant ships under their protection . Dance was unknowingly assisted by the information that had reached Linois at Batavia , which claimed that there were 23 merchant ships and the brig in the convoy . Dance had collected six additional ships during his journey , and the identity of these were unknown to the French , who assumed that at least some of the unidentified vessels must be warships , particularly as several vessels had been recently painted at Canton to resemble ships of the line .

At 09 : 00 Linois was still only observing the convoy , reluctant to attack until he could be sure of the nature of his opponents . Dance responded to the reprieve by reforming the line of battle into sailing formation to increase his convoy 's speed with the intention of reaching the Straits ahead of Linois . With the convoy a less intimidating target , Linois began to slowly approach the British ships . By 13 : 00 it was clear that Linois 's faster ships were in danger of isolating the rear of the convoy , and Dance ordered his lead ships to tack and come about , so that they would cross in front of the French squadron . The British successfully executed the manoeuvre , and at 13 : 15 Linois opened fire on the lead ship ? Royal George ? under the command of John Fam Timmins . The Royal George and the next four ships in line , the Indiaman Ganges , Dance 's Earl Camden , the Warley and the Alfred , all returned fire , Ganges initially attacking Royal George in error . Captain James Prendergrass in Hope , the next in line , was so eager to join the battle that he misjudged his speed and collided with Warley , the ships falling back as their crews worked to separate their rigging . Shots were then exchanged at long range for 43 minutes , neither side inflicting severe damage .

Royal George had a sailor named Hugh Watt killed , another man wounded , and suffered some damage to her hull . None of the other British ships or any of the French reported anything worse than superficial damage in the engagement . At 14 : 00 , Linois abandoned the action and ordered his squadron to haul away with the wind and sail eastwards , away from the convoy , under all sail . Determined to maintain the pretence of the presence of warships , Dance ordered the ships flying naval ensigns , including his flagship Earl Camden , to chase the French . None of the merchant

ships could match the French speed , but an attempt at a chase would hopefully dissuade the French from returning . For two hours , Dance 's squadron followed Linois , Hope coming close to catching Aventurier but ultimately unable to overtake the brig . At 16 : 00 , Dance decided to gather his scattered ships and return to his former heading rather than risk attack from other raiders or lose sight of his convoy in the darkness . By 20 : 00 , the entire British convoy had anchored at the entrance to the Straits of Malacca . On 28 February , the British ships of the line HMS Sceptre and Albion joined them in the Strait and conducted them safely to Saint Helena in the South Atlantic .

There HMS Plantagenet escorted the convoy to England . Five whalers and the Carmarthen , Captain Doree , also joined the convoy , with the Blackhouse , from coast of Guinea , joining at sea . The convoy returned to England without further incident .

Linois 's squadron reached Batavia several days after the action without encountering any British ships . He was there joined by Atalante and , after taking on supplies , made sail for Île de France , arriving on 2 April . The Dutch brig Aventurier was left at Batavia and remained there until a raid on the port by a British force in November 1806 , when it was destroyed . The French admiral later attempted to explain his conduct during the engagement :

The ships which had tacked rejoined those which were engaging us , and three of the engaging ships manoeuvred to double our rear , while the remainder of the fleet , crowding sail and bearing up , evinced an intention to surround us . By this manoeuvre the enemy would have rendered my situation very dangerous . The superiority of his force was ascertained , and I had no longer to deliberate on the part I should take to avoid the consequence of an unequal engagement : profiting by the smoke , I hauled up to port , and steering east @-@ north @-@ east , I increased by distance from the enemy , who continued the pursuit of the squadron for three hours , discharging at it several broadsides .

= = = Orders of battle = = =

= = Aftermath = =

Nathaniel Dance and his fellow captains were highly praised in the aftermath of the battle : in saving the convoy they had prevented both the HEIC and Lloyd 's of London from likely financial ruin , the repercussions of which would have had profound effects across the British Empire . The various commanders and their crews were presented with a £ 50 @,@ 000 prize fund to be divided among them , and the Lloyd 's Patriotic Fund and other national and mercantile institutions made a series of awards of ceremonial swords , silver plate and monetary gifts to individual officers . Lloyd 's Patriotic Fund gave each captain a sword worth 50 pounds , and one to Royal Navy Lieutenant Robert Merrick Fowler , travelling as a passenger on Earl Camden , and one worth 100 pounds to Nathaniel Dance .

Dance was specifically rewarded , receiving royal recognition when he was made a Knight Bachelor by King George III . He was also personally presented with the sum of £ 5 @,@ 000 by the Bombay Insurance Company and an additional £ 500 a year for life by the HEIC . Dance immediately retired from the sea to Enfield Town , where he died in 1827 . He refused to take full credit for the survival of the convoy , 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 .

Among the passengers on the Indiamen were a number of Royal Navy personnel , survivors of the shipwreck of the exploratory vessel HMS Porpoise off the coast of New South Wales the previous year . This party ? carried aboard Ganges , Royal George and Earl Camden ? volunteered to assist

the gun teams aboard their ships and Dance specifically thanked them in his account of the action . One was Lieutenant Robert Merrick Fowler , the former commander of Porpoise , who distinguished himself in a variety of capacities during the engagement .

Some of the party had influential careers in the Navy , including the naval architect James Inman , who sailed on Warley , and John Franklin , who later became a polar explorer . Also aboard was Indian businessman Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy returning from the second of his five voyages to China .

Linois continued his raiding , achieving some success against individual sailing ships , but failing to press successfully his numerical superiority against British naval forces ; most notably at the Battle of Vizagapatam on 15 September 1804 and the Action of 6 August 1805 . Ironically , Linois was eventually captured at the Action of 13 March 1806 after mistaking a squadron of British ships of the line for a merchant convoy in the mid -@ Atlantic . Linois was concerned throughout the engagement for the safety of his ships : with the nearest dockyard over 3 @, @ 000 nmi ( 3 @, @ 500 mi ; 5 @, @ 600 km ) away at Île de France , he could not afford to suffer severe damage to his rigging or masts that would leave his squadron crippled . He also sought to defend his behaviour off Pulo Aura with the claim that the British convoy was protected by as many as eight ships of the line , and that he had performed heroically in saving his squadron from this overwhelming force . Subsequent historians have ridiculed this latter statement : William James wryly commented in his account of the action , written in 1827 , that " it would be uncharitable to call into question the courage of Rear @-@ admiral Linois " and William Laird Clowes stated in 1900 that " his timidity and want of enterprise threw away a great opportunity " . Nicholas Rodger , writing in 2004 , was even more critical , insisting that " his [ Linois 's ] officers do not seem to have been fooled , and it is extremely difficult to believe that he was . " He goes on to suggest that no experienced seaman could possibly have mistaken a poorly manned and poorly trained merchant crew for the crew of a real Royal Navy ship of the line , concluding that " Linois had thrown away a prize worth at least £ 8 million through mere timidity " . The most scathing criticism of Linois 's conduct came from Napoleon himself , who wrote to Minister of Marine Denis Decrès on the subject , stating :

All the enterprises at sea which have been undertaken since I became the head of the Government have missed fire because my admirals see double and have discovered , I know not how or where , that war can be made without running risks ... Tell Linois that he has shown want of courage of mind , that kind of courage which I consider the highest quality in a leader .

= = In literature = =

The battle has been fictionalised twice , in Captain Frederick Marryat 's 1832 novel *Newton Forster* ; or , the *Merchant Service* , and in Patrick O 'Brian 's novel *HMS Surprise* , published in 1973 . In O 'Brian 's novel , Royal Navy Captain Jack Aubrey aids the China Fleet , organizing the Indiamen who then succeeded as in history . The rewards were shed on Aubrey , rather than the lead merchant captain .