

= Action of 24 October 1793 =

The Action of 24 October 1793 was a minor naval engagement during the first year of the French Revolutionary Wars . While cruising in the Northern Bay of Biscay , the British Royal Navy frigate HMS Thames , under Captain James Cotes , encountered the much larger French frigate Uranie , under Captain Jean @-@ François Tartu . The ships engaged , with each suffering severe damage until they separated after nearly four hours of continual combat . Cotes ordered his crew to make hasty repairs , intending to resume the battle , but Uranie 's crew , with their captain dead , slipped away while Thames was unable to manoeuvre . At 16 : 00 , with repairs on Thames ongoing , a French squadron of three frigates and a brig , under Captain Zacharie Allemand , arrived , firing on Thames as they approached . Outnumbered , Cotes surrendered his ship to Allemand , who commended Cotes on his resistance to the far larger Uranie .

The French brought Thames into Brest , where sailors from Allemand 's squadron looted the frigate . The British officers were imprisoned for the next two years . The frigate was commissioned into the French Navy as Tamise , and Uranie was renamed Tartu in honour of her deceased captain . Both vessels then served with the French Atlantic Fleet , Tamise until 8 June 1796 , when the British recaptured her off the Scilly Isles , and Tartu until 30 December 1796 when the British captured her during the Expédition d 'Irlande .

= = Background = =

In February 1793 , amid rising political tension , the French Republic declared war on Great Britain , drawing Britain into the French Revolutionary Wars . At sea , the Bay of Biscay , the Western Approaches and the English Channel all became areas of significant naval activity as French privateers sailed on raiding cruises against British merchant shipping . To augment these attacks , the French naval authorities dispatched squadrons of frigates to attack British trade routes . To counter these operations , the Royal Navy sent their own frigates to sea , sometimes in squadrons and sometimes on single patrols .

A French frigate squadron sent to on a cruise in the Northern Bay of Biscay in the early autumn of 1793 was commanded by Captain Zacharie Allemand and consisted of the frigates Carmagnole , Résolue , Sémillante and Uranie with the brig @-@ corvette Espiègle . On 22 October , the squadron sighted the 16 @-@ gun Spanish brig Alcoudia and Allemand ordered Uranie under Captain Jean @-@ François Tartu to separate from the squadron and pursue the Spaniard . Uranie was easily able to capture Alcoudia , taking the prisoners on board the frigate and establishing a prize crew on the brig . Two days later , Uranie was sailing southwards in company with the prize with the wind at the southwest , when a sail appeared to the north at 09 : 30 .

The new arrival was a British ship sent from the Channel Fleet on a lone patrol : the frigate HMS Thames under Captain James Cotes . Thames was an old frigate , built in 1758 and carrying 32 12 @-@ pounder guns . The ship was below its standard complement of 215 men , sailing with only 184 , which meant that the 6 @-@ pounder guns that augmented the main battery could not be manned . By comparison , Uranie was five years old and carried 40 18 @-@ pounder guns and weighing almost double the weight of the British ship . Her full complement was of 260 men , but she lacked 60 of her sailors , dispatched in prize crews over three captured ships , and was burdened with over 260 prisoners . At first unsure of the identity of the ship to the north , Tartu hoisted a blue flag as an identification signal and sent the Alcoudia away in case the ship should be revealed to be hostile . Cotes did not respond to the signal , and the two ships were soon hidden from one another by a rain squall .

= = Battle = =

At 10 : 15 the weather cleared , leaving both frigates well in sight of one another , both Tartu and Cotes identifying the opposing ship as an enemy and clearing for action , Tartu hoisting the French tricolour . With both captains determined on battle , the frigates approached one another rapidly on

opposing tacks . Uranie was the first to fire , discharging a full broadside at Thames and then wearing around to pull alongside Thames on the same tack . The manoeuvre placed the two frigates directly alongside one another and a close engagement began , each discharging broadside after broadside at the another . At 12 : 15 , a round shot swept Uranie 's quarterdeck , killing a helmsman , cutting a boy in half , wounding another , and severing Tartu 's leg under the knee ; Tartu was brought below deck and Lieutenant Wuibert assumed command of Uranie . The fight continued in this manner for several hours , until 14 : 20 , when Uranie was able to pull ahead of Thames and fire several broadsides into the bows of the British ship , raking her . British historian William James recorded that the crew of Uranie then attempted to board via the starboard bow of Thames , but were driven off by fire from Cotes ' bow guns , which had been double ? shotted for this reason . However the after action report by Lieutenant Wuibert on Uranie states that no boarding action was attempted .

With the boarding attempt thwarted Uranie pulled back , turning southwards to put distance between the vessels . Tartu , brought below deck and dying , had ordered a retreat for fear that his prisoners would revolt and because the engagement was drifting in the east @-@ north @-@ east direction , where two sails , assumed to be British warships , had been sighted . It was assumed on Thames that the French ship was retreating , the British crew cheering as the firing ceased . Cotes however anticipated a resumption of the action and ordered his men to begin making repairs immediately : Thames was so badly damaged that pursuit was out of the question . All three of Thames ' masts had been shot through , most of the rigging had been torn away , the hull and decks were badly damaged and 34 men were killed or wounded . Uranie was in a similar state , and hauled up approximately 2 nautical miles ( 3 @.@ 7 km ) away , the masts intact but damaged with most of the rigging shot through and numerous holes smashed through the hull . It was also evident on Thames that the crew of the French ship were pumping water over the side , an indication that the ship had been damaged below the waterline .

Cotes ' ship was fit only to sail with the wind , and the captain urged his men to make greater efforts to repair their ship before Uranie could come up with them again . So engrossed was the British crew with their repairs that it was not until 16 : 00 that it was realised that the French frigate was no longer holding station within sight , and had completely disappeared . This led some on the British ship to assume that Uranie had sunk , although in fact the ship had simply turned away in an effort to make it back to Rochefort to repair the damage suffered in the engagement . Also apparent were a number of sails in the distance . These rapidly approached and were revealed to be a frigate squadron flying the Union Flag . Cotes was unable to manoeuvre his ship or respond to the new arrivals , which were soon identified as French vessels wearing false flags . The leading frigate pulled up close to Thames and fired a broadside at the British frigate . Cotes immediately hailed the French , announcing that he was in no position to fight them due to the damage his ship had suffered and that he was striking his flag .

= = Aftermath = =

Allemand requested that Cotes come aboard Carmagnole , but Cotes responded that he was unable to do so as his ship 's boats had all been destroyed . Allemand sent a boat from his own ship to Thames and brought Cotes to Carmagnole as a prisoner of war ; Cotes used the delay to destroy his ship 's documents . Allemand questioned Cotes intently about the nature of his recent combat and , on identifying Uranie as one of his own squadron , commented that Tartu should have defeated Thames in half the time the action had taken .

Thames subsequently returned to Brest with Allemand 's squadron on 25 October , although the British ship was thoroughly looted during the journey by the French sailors , whose officers were unable to exert any control over them . The ship 's officers had been removed , including the surgeon , and therefore the British wounded did not receive medical treatment until the squadron arrived at Brest on 25 October ; two subsequently died , making the total British deaths 13 , with 21 wounded . Cotes wrote a report on the engagement , which he sent to the Admiralty from captivity in Gisors , which the French authorities intercepted and delayed , with the result that the first news of

Thames' fate did not arrive in Britain until 7 May 1794 . Cotes was soon afterwards exchanged and returned to Britain , where a court martial investigating the loss of Thames exonerated him . Several of his officers were not repatriated however , remaining in French captivity for the next two years .

Uranie lost four killed , including Captain Tartu , and seven wounded , including three seriously , and the frigate arrived at Rochefort soon afterwards , where in honour of the captain 's death , she was renamed Tartu . It was subsequently incorrectly reported in Britain that the ship 's name was changed to Tortue ( tortoise ) to disguise its identity after being defeated by Thames . Thames was taken into French service as Tamise , and participated in the Atlantic campaign of May 1794 the following year . The French lost both frigates in 1796 . HMS Santa Margarita recaptured Tamise in an engagement near the Scilly Isles between British and French frigate squadrons at the Action of 8 June 1796 . Some six months later , the ship of the line HMS Polyphemus captured Tartu on 30 December in the aftermath of the disastrous Expédition d 'Irlande .