

= Action of 9 February 1799 ( South Africa ) =

The Action of 9 February 1799 was a minor naval engagement of the French Revolutionary Wars between a British Royal Navy frigate and a French privateer frigate fought 100 nautical miles ( 190 km ) west of the southeastern coast of what is now Natal in South Africa . The 32 @-@ gun French frigate Prudente had since the start of the war been part of a squadron operating from Île de France ( now Mauritius ) . This squadron had dispersed during 1798 , with the ships sent on independent commerce raiding operations across the British trade routes in the Indian Ocean . Prudente had subsequently been seized in the autumn of that year by Anne Joseph Hippolyte de Maurès , Comte de Malartic , the Governor of Île de France , and sold to a private raiding company .

In early 1799 Prudente was operating off South Africa , attacking British trade passing to or from the Cape Colony when the ship was discovered by British frigate HMS Daedalus under Captain Henry Lidgbird Ball . Prudente turned away and Ball gave chase , following the French ship closely . After five hours Daedalus caught Prudente and fired a raking broadside into the stern , disabling the French ship . For another hour the action continued at close range until Prudente was forced to surrender .

= = Background = =

By 1799 British forces dominated the Indian Ocean , controlling the economically vital trade routes from China , the Dutch East Indies and British India to Europe . The French Navy had originally deployed only two frigates in the region , Prudente and Cybèle , operating from Port Louis on Île de France . This force was subsequently augmented in the summer of 1796 by a large squadron of frigates under Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey , which cruised in the East Indies during 1796 and 1797 , suffering setbacks at Action of 9 September 1796 and the Bali Strait Incident . During 1798 the squadron dispersed , as his crews became increasingly mutinous and the Colonial Assembly of Île de France grew openly disdainful of his efforts , refusing to provide reinforcements or supplies to his ships .

To mitigate this disaffection , Sercey ordered two of his frigates , Prudente and Forte to cruise in the Bay of Bengal against British trade during the autumn of 1798 . When these ships returned , Sercey had already sailed for the east , leaving instructions for the frigates to follow . These orders were however countermanded by the Governor of Île de France , Malartic , who ordered the frigates seized while they were in harbour . Although Sercey protested Malartic 's actions , the governor issued new orders to the ships : Forte was sent northeast to operate in the Bay of Bengal off Calcutta while Prudente was partially disarmed and sold to a privateering concern to operate against trade as a commercial investment .

= = Battle = =

Command of Prudente was given to Captain Emanuel @-@ Hippolite Le Jolliff , who sailed to the region to the east of the British held Cape Colony to prey on transoceanic merchant shipping sailing to and from Cape Town . The cruise achieved some success , including the seizure of an American merchant ship from Canton , which had been given a prize crew of 17 and armed with 6 @-@ pounder guns from Prudente 's quarterdeck , leaving the French frigate with only 30 guns including its main battery of 12 @-@ pounder long guns . At dawn on 9 February 1799 , while sailing approximately 100 nautical miles ( 190 km ) southwest of the coast of Natal a sail was seen to the southeast , approaching rapidly . Recognising a British frigate , La Joliff ordered his ships to separate at 07 : 00 , the American ship sailing south while he took Prudente northwards , hoping to draw off the British ship so that the prize could escape .

The new arrival was HMS Daedalus , a 32 @-@ gun 12 @-@ pounder Royal Navy frigate under the command of Captain Henry Lidgbird Ball . Ball maintained pursuit of Prudente , running 6 nautical miles ( 11 km ) behind his opponent until 10 : 00 when La Joliff swung his frigate to starboard with the wind , Ball following close behind . With the British frigate closing , la Joliff

ordered his men to begin firing their stern @-@ chasers at Daedalus and at 12 : 10 hauled up to engage , firing a broadside into the British ship . Ball shortened sail and brought his ship across the stern of Prudente , firing a devastating raking broadside into the French frigate at 12 : 25 . Ball then drew Daedalus alongside Prudente and the ships fought a close range broadside duel , fire from Ball 's ship bringing down the mizenmast on Prudente after 15 minutes . It was only at 13 : 21 , more than an hour after the battle had begun , that La Joliff acknowledged the damage to his ship and struck his colours .

= = Aftermath = =

Prudente was badly damaged in the engagement and had lost heavy casualties , including 27 killed and 22 wounded . Losses and damage on Daedalus were much lighter , with only one sailor and one Royal Marine killed and eleven wounded . Ball conducted hasty repairs and then brought the captured Prudente into Table Bay on 15 February . There the captured ship was condemned by the port commander Captain George Losack : although Prudente was a high @-@ quality ship the naval facilities at the Cape Colony were insufficient to conduct the necessary repairs and the French frigate was not subsequently commissioned into the Royal Navy . As a result , there were few rewards for the action , unusually the junior officers of Daedalus were not promoted in the aftermath of the battle . Among the prisoners taken from Prudente was a deserter from the Royal Navy named Thomas Tring , who was subsequently court martialed and hanged .

In the Indian Ocean theatre the loss of Prudente was compounded a few weeks later by the capture of Forte at the Action of 28 February 1799 , which left Sercey with a shortage of available warships . At the Action of 11 December 1799 his last frigate , Preneuse , was intercepted and destroyed off Île de France . A commander without a command , the French admiral returned to France and subsequently retired .