

= Action of 3 February 1812 =

The Action of 3 February 1812 was an unusual minor naval engagement off the western coast of Haiti between a British frigate and a frigate manned by a loose collation of Haitian rebels . The battle was fought against the background of the Napoleonic Wars and the collapse of government in Haiti in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution eight years earlier . After the French had been expelled from Haiti in 1804 , the newly independent nation was first ruled by Jean @-@ Jacques Dessalines , who was murdered in 1806 and replaced by two of his advisors , Henri Christophe and Alexandre Pétion . These rulers divided the country between them and in the confused political situation that followed a number of minor fiefdoms appeared , including one led by Jérôme Maximilien Borgella in the south of the island called the Sud Department . The small Haitian Navy defected to Borgella , who crewed the vessels with a collection of sailors from various countries , led by a notorious privateer named Gaspard .

Stationed off Haiti was the British frigate HMS Southampton under Captain Sir James Lucas Yeo , tasked with observing the political situation but with orders not to interfere in the intermittent conflict between Christophe and Pétion . Yeo 's orders did not include Borgella 's ships and Yeo reasoned that the Haitian flagship , the large frigate Heureuse Réunion (recently renamed from Améthyste and often reported under its former name) , presented a serious threat to international trade in the region .

Sailing to intercept the Haitian ship , Yeo discovered her in the Gulf of Léogane and ordered Gaspard to surrender . The Haitian refused , and the frigates exchanged shots at 06 : 30 . The superior seamanship and discipline on Southampton prevented Gaspard from boarding the British ship with his greater numbers and within half an hour Heureuse Réunion was dismasted and battered . At 07 : 45 the Haitian ship surrendered , Yeo depositing the crew ashore and bringing Heureuse Réunion to Port Royal , Jamaica . At Jamaica , his actions were approved by his superiors and Heureuse Réunion , renamed Améthyste , was returned to Henri Christophe .

= = Background = =

During the Napoleonic Wars , the Caribbean Sea was initially an important theatre of naval conflict , as ships operating from the various French , British , Spanish and Dutch colonies preyed on enemy trade . During 1809 and 1810 however , the Royal Navy launched a series of co @-@ ordinated amphibious operations that eliminated the French and Dutch colonies and brought the conflict in the Caribbean to an end . With the threat of attacks on British trade in the region significantly reduced , the Royal Navy correspondingly reduced their presence in the Caribbean and the remaining British ships were distributed to observe trouble spots in the region , which in 1812 included the independent nation of Haiti .

Haiti had won its independence from France in 1804 , the first Caribbean nation to do so . The Haitians had fought a lengthy and bloody war against the French known as the Haitian Revolution , in which armies of former slaves led by Toussaint Louverture and then Jean @-@ Jacques Dessalines succeeded in driving the French into their fortified ports and then systematically eliminating their enclaves . With the start of the Napoleonic Wars in 1803 , French reinforcements for the garrison on Haiti were delayed and intercepted by the British Royal Navy , who blockaded the island and took the surrenders of the last garrisons in 1804 , removing them and their dependents to prevent a massacre . Dessalines rapidly established himself as monarch of Haiti , but his reign was cut short in 1806 when his closest advisors , Henri Christophe and Alexandre Pétion organised his assassination . Assuming control of Haiti , Christophe laid claim to the northern part of the country and Pétion the south , the two sides waging a constant low @-@ level civil war during the next decade . Many minor rulers sprang up during this period , especially in the south , where Pétion gave parcels of land for his followers to establish their own private fiefdoms . One such warlord was Jérôme Maximilien Borgella , who took over command of a small state in the region of Léogane following the death of its ruler , André Rigaud .

In early 1809 , the French sent a number of reinforcement convoys to their blockaded colonies in

the hope of strengthening the garrisons before the British invasions began . Many ships , including four frigates , were lost in these missions and few reached their destinations successfully . Among these failed attempts was Troude 's expedition to the Caribbean , which arrived in April 1809 at the Îles des Saintes . Finding that Guadeloupe was the only surviving colony , Amable Troude intended to anchor at Basse @-@ Terre and unload his supplies , but was blockaded in the Îles des Saintes by a British squadron under Vice @-@ Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane . Attempting to break out on 14 April , Troude led his main squadron northwest towards Puerto Rico while two en flûte frigates slipped out northeast to Basse @-@ Terre , arriving safely . Troude 's squadron was defeated on 17 April , but the frigates Félicité and Furieuse remained at Basse @-@ Terre until 14 June , when they attempted to break out and return to France , laden with trade goods . The British blockade squadron were soon in pursuit and on 18 June the frigate HMS Latona captured Félicité without a fight . Furieuse was captured a month later in the North Atlantic . Félicité was 24 years old and was therefore considered too antiquated for commissioning in the Royal Navy ; instead she was sold to Henri Christophe to form the nucleus of the new Haitian Navy under the name Améthyste .

= = Battle = =

At some point in January 1812 the Haitian Navy defected , for reasons unknown , from Christophe to Borgella . Borgella placed a noted French privateer named Gaspard in command of the squadron , which included the frigate Améthyste (renamed Heureuse Réunion) , a corvette and a brig . Gaspard then armed Heureuse Réunion with 44 cannon , took on board a motley crew of over 600 men , a mixture of Haitian , French , American and other nationalities , and began cruising in the Gulf of Gonâve . The British observer off Haiti at this time was Captain Sir James Lucas Yeo in the frigate HMS Southampton , under strict orders to respect the flags of Christophe and Pétion , but not those of the minor warlords that had emerged along the coast . On 2 January word reached him at Port au Prince of Gaspard 's movements and he immediately sailed to intercept him , concerned that if Gaspard was allowed to take his powerful squadron out of Haitian waters he might begin attacks on merchant ships regardless of nationality .

At 06 : 00 on 3 February , Yeo discovered Gaspard 's ships at anchor to the south of the island of Guanaboa and demanded that Gaspard come aboard Southampton with his commissioning papers , to establish under whose authority Gaspard commanded the warship . The Haitian captain refused , but sent aboard his first lieutenant with a note purported to be from Borgella , signed " Borgellat , general in chief of the south of Hayti " . As Borgella had no authority to commission warships , Yeo ordered the lieutenant to tell Gaspard that his ships must submit to Southampton and be taken to Port Royal , Jamaica , where their ownership could be established by the naval authorities . He would have five minutes to consider the proposal . A British officer accompanied the Haitian lieutenant back to Heureuse Réunion for Gaspard 's answer , and was informed within three minutes that Gaspard had no intention of submitting to the British ship . He was also told that should Yeo be intent on fighting the Haitian ship then he should indicate it with a bow gun fired ahead of Heureuse Réunion . Returning to Southampton at 06 : 30 , the lieutenant relayed the message and the bow gun was fired , followed a few seconds later by a full broadside from Southampton .

Heureuse Réunion responded to the cannonade in kind . During the engagement , Gaspard repeatedly attempted to board Southampton , where his vastly superior numbers could overwhelm the British crew . Yeo was aware of his enemy 's intentions , and repeatedly manoeuvred out of the way , his more disciplined and agile vessel easily able to remain out of contact with the overloaded Haitian ship . Within half an hour the highly efficient gunners on Southampton had knocked down the main and mizen masts on Heureuse Réunion , leaving her unable to manoeuvre and vulnerable to repeated pounding at close range . Despite the severe damage the Haitian ship suffered , her crew continued to fire cannon at irregular intervals for 45 minutes , each shot prompting a broadside from the British ship . The two smaller Haitian vessels did not support the frigate , fleeing towards Maraguana near Petit Goâve to shelter under the batteries there . By 07 : 45 , after over an hour of heavy fire , Yeo hailed Heureuse Réunion to discover whether or not she had surrendered . Somebody aboard replied that they had , although Gaspard had been seriously wounded and was

no longer in command , so the identity of the person who gave the surrender is not known .

= = Aftermath = =

As Southampton stopped firing , the remaining masts of the Haitian ship fell overboard . Casualties on Heureuse Réunion were immense : of the 600 ? 700 crew , 105 were dead and 120 wounded , the latter including Gaspard , who subsequently died of his injuries . Yeo 's loss was one man killed and ten wounded , from a crew of 212 . Seeking to rid himself of so many prisoners , Yeo landed most of them at Maraguana before sailing to Port au Prince , where the rest were landed and temporary jury masts were fitted to Heureuse Réunion for the journey to Jamaica . The British retained 20 prisoners for trial at Port Royal . Heureuse Réunion was repaired at Jamaica and subsequently restored to Christophe under the name Améthyste , returning to Haitian service . Yeo 's action in attacking the Haitian ship , although not officially sanctioned by his commanding officer beforehand , was commended .

The Caribbean rose in importance again later in 1812 , with the outbreak of the War of 1812 between Britain and the United States . American privateers threatened British trade routes and Royal Navy ships were sent out to defeat them , including Southampton , which was wrecked in the Bahamas during an anti @-@ privateer patrol in November 1812 . There were no further significant actions in the region during the Napoleonic Wars , the presence of Royal Navy patrols deterred any large scale French or American operations in the Caribbean .