

= Raid on Dunkirk (1800) =

The Raid on Dunkirk of 7 July 1800 was an attack by a British Royal Navy force on the well defended French anchorage of Dunkirk in the English Channel during the French Revolutionary Wars . French naval forces had been blockaded in their harbours during the conflict , and often the only method of attacking them was through fireships or " cutting @-@ out " expeditions , in which boats would carry boarding parties into the harbour at night , seize ships at anchor and bring them out . The attack on Dunkirk was a combination of both of these types of operation , aimed at a powerful French frigate squadron at anchor in Dunkirk harbour . The assault made use of a variety of experimental weaponry , some of which was tested in combat for the first time with mixed success .

Although assault by the heavily armed sloop HMS Dart proved successful , the fireships achieved little and various other British craft involved in the operation had little effect on the eventual outcome . The French response was disorganised and ineffectual , losing one frigate captured . Three others were almost destroyed , only escaping by cutting their anchor cables and fleeing into the coastal shoals where they ran aground . Although all three frigates were refloated and returned to service , the operation had cost the French heavy casualties . The British force suffered minimal losses , although the exact totals are uncertain . Many of the British officers involved were highly praised and rewarded with promotions and prize money .

= = Background = =

By the late French Revolutionary Wars (1793 ? 1802) , a string of victories at sea ensured that the Royal Navy was dominant . The French Navy in particular had suffered heavy losses , and in Northern European waters had been forced back into its own harbours by British blockade squadrons . Although large ports were watched by fleets of ships of the line , small ports had their own blockade squadrons too , including the shallow French ports on the English Channel . These harbours could not accommodate ships of the line but were well situated for frigates that attacked shipping in British waters whenever they could escape the blockade . One such port was Dunkirk in French Flanders , which contained a squadron of four French frigates : the 44 @-@ gun *Poursuivante* under Commodore Jean @-@ Joseph Castagnier , the 40 @-@ gun *Carmagnole* and the 36 @-@ gun *Désirée* and *Incorruptible* . Dunkirk was well defended , with gun batteries and gunboats overlooking the harbour . In addition , the port was surrounded by complicated coastal shoals into which the frigates could retreat if attacked .

The port was closely watched , it was determined that an attack by a squadron of smaller vessels on the frigates stood a chance of success and a number of ships were instructed to gather off the coast . Captain Henry Inman of the frigate HMS *Andromeda* , had overall command ; the force included HMS *Nemesis* under Captain Thomas Baker and 15 smaller vessels . The small craft included four fireships , small brigs designed to operate as minor warships until such time as they were deemed expendable in an attack on an anchored target , and the sloop HMS *Dart* under Commander Patrick Campbell . *Dart* was a highly unusual ship : her size meant that she was unrated even though her armament included 30 32 @-@ pounder carronades . The carronades were mounted to a new design that minimised recoil and made them faster and easier to load .

The squadron had assembled by 17 June 1800 , but for ten days the winds and tides prevented the operation . The French prepared for any attack by anchoring their frigates in a line running across the harbour from east to west , supported by gunboats that patrolled the harbour . The western @-@ most ships were positioned so that they could make their escape into the channels of the Braak Sands if they came under concerted attack . Inman knew that his largest ships , *Andromeda* and *Nemesis* , would prove liabilities in the narrow harbour . Both remained offshore , their crews dispersed into the smaller ships that would lead the attack , including the fireships HMS *Wasp* , HMS *Falcon* , HMS *Comet* and HMS *Rosario* , the brigs HMS *Biter* and HMS *Boxer* , and the hired ships *Kent* , *Ann* and *Vigilant* (on which Inman sailed) . The entire squadron was led by *Dart* , under Campbell , whose target was the eastern end of the French line , the frigate *Désirée* .

= = Battle = =

Inman 's squadron entered Dunkirk harbour on the late evening of 7 July 1800 , Dart slowly leading the way and the rest of the squadron sailing in a line behind the heavily armed sloop . Inman had crewed the hired ships Vigilant and Nile with men impressed from smugglers ships , and these men acted as guides for the British force . At midnight the shapes of the French frigates appeared from the darkness ahead and Dart gradually passed down their line , until a hail from one of the frigates demanded to know where Dart had come from . A French @-@ speaking officer replied " De Bordeaux " (" from Bordeaux ") and was then asked what the little ships behind Dart were , to which the officer replied " Je ne sais pas " (" I do not know ") . Apparently satisfied with this reply , there were no more questions from the frigate and Dart continued its passage until it came alongside the last French frigate but one . Lookouts on this ship recognised the shape of the strange vessel that had appeared out of the night and immediately opened fire , to which Dart swiftly responded . Campbell knew that his heavy carronades were devastating at close range , and had ordered them to be double @-@ shotted , meaning that each carronade carried twice the ordinary number of missiles . The effect was immediate , with heavy casualties and severe damage inflicted on the French vessel . The fast loading abilities of the carronades allowed the sloop 's 15 guns to keep up a steady fire as Dart swept on to the last ship in line , Désirée .

Using an anchor to steady his ship , Campbell placed Dart alongside the French frigate , with his bows between the French ship 's masts . This allowed a boarding party led by Lieutenant James M 'Dermeit to leap aboard Désirée and drive the French off the frigate 's deck in hand @-@ to @-@ hand combat . M 'Dermeit was wounded in the fighting , and called across for reinforcements as the French regrouped in the stern of the ship . Campbell used his anchors to swing Dart alongside the French frigate and a second boarding party under Lieutenant William Isaac Pearce charged aboard , routing the French reinforcements that were emerging from below decks . With the upper deck secure , Pearce severed the anchor cables , steered Désirée out of the harbour and over the sandbars that were rapidly being exposed by the receding tide . With his target captured , Campbell turned Dart towards the second British attack , against the head of the French line .

As Dart and Désirée fought at the southern end of the line , the British fireships attacked the van . The fireships had been stripped of all useful materials and been converted into their original role . Small crews of volunteers set alight to the vessels and all four bore down on the three northern French ships with supporting fire coming from Dart and the brigs . The smaller vessels , accompanied by a number of ship 's boats from the British frigates outside the harbour , attended the fireships and removed their crews once they were alight . Although all four fireships were well @-@ handled , the French were prepared for the tactic and the squadron severed its anchor cables and sailed into the channels around the Braak Sands . This manoeuvre took them past Biter and Boxer and also exposed them to continued fire from Dart , but , despite the damage , all three made the safety of the channel , into which the British could not follow without fear of grounding . One of the French ships did become stuck at low tide , but out of the range of the British ships and it suffered no serious damage . The fireships drifted aimlessly before exploding uselessly , succeeding only in wounding two British sailors whose boat was too close to Comet . While the frigates and fireships fought , a host of small French gunboats emerged from Dunkirk and were met by the hired ships , armed as brigs . In a sharp engagement the hired ships lost four wounded but successfully held back the gunboats during the battle .

= = Aftermath = =

With his principal targets out of reach , Inman called off the attack during the early morning and withdrew his ships . He had lost one man killed and 17 wounded , all but six of the latter coming from Dart (some sources only record the men wounded on Dart in the total) . French casualties were far more severe , with more than 100 men killed or wounded , mostly on Désirée , which had taken the brunt of Dart 's attack . Recognising that he had no room for prisoners and that many of

the French wounded required urgent treatment , Inman ordered the wounded men to be sent back to Dunkirk , although it appears this amnesty was subsequently extended to all the prisoners . By midday on 8 July 1800 the British squadron had returned to its position off the coast while Désirée was sent to Britain , later commissioned in the Royal Navy as HMS Desiree under the command of Captain Inman . Prize money was paid for the captured frigate , but head money , an award made for enemy servicemen killed , wounded or captured , was not paid , probably due to the return of the prisoners . For their services , Commander Campell and Lieutenant M 'Dermeit were promoted , the former transferring from Dart into the much smaller sixth rate HMS Aridane . The French ships returned from the Braak Sand during the morning and repairs were conducted in Dunkirk . In 1847 the Admiralty awarded the Naval General Service Medal with clasp " Capture of the Desiree " to all surviving claimants from the action .