

= Action of 18 November 1809 =

The Action of 18 November 1809 was the most significant engagement of a six @-@ month cruise by a French frigate squadron in the Indian Ocean during the Napoleonic Wars . The French commander , Commodore Jacques Hamelin , raided across the Bay of Bengal with his squadron and achieved local superiority , capturing numerous merchant ships and minor warships . On 18 November 1809 , three ships of Hamelin 's squadron encountered a convoy of India @-@ bound East Indiamen , mainly carrying recruits for the Indian Army , then administered by the Honourable East India Company (HEIC) .

Despite spirited resistance from the largest British merchant ship , Windham , the failure of the other Indiamen to support their leader and the size and power of the French ships forced the British to withdraw : all the HEIC ships were subsequently captured by the larger , faster French warships . A month later , Hamelin 's raiding campaign skirted disaster when a winter hurricane on the voyage back to Île de France almost wrecked his flagship Vénus . Vénus only survived with the co @-@ operation of the British prisoners aboard , who brought the ship safely to port . Only two of the captured Indiamen were successfully brought to Ile de France : the same storm that nearly destroyed Vénus scattered the squadron and its prizes , allowing a patrolling British frigate to recapture Windham just a few miles from the French island .

= = Background = =

In the late autumn of 1808 , the French Navy despatched four large frigates to the East Indies . These ships , stationed on Île de France and Île Bonaparte , were ordered to attack and disrupt British trade routes from the Far East , in particular British India . This disruption was intended to have a negative financial effect on the British economy and force the Royal Navy to send ships into the Indian Ocean , expending valuable resources in doing so . The commander of this French force was Commodore Jacques Hamelin , a highly skilled officer who ordered his frigates to disperse in the Bay of Bengal to hunt British East Indiamen , large and well armed merchant ships that carried millions of pounds worth of goods between Britain and her Empire ever year .

During the late spring , the most active of the French frigates was Caroline , which intercepted a convoy of East Indiamen in the Action of 31 May 1809 . Due to a brief but determined resistance by the larger vessels , one of the East Indiamen was able to escape , but two others were captured and brought to Île Bonaparte . During the spring of 1809 , the Royal Navy in the region , represented by Admiral Albemarle Bertie at the Cape of Good Hope , had also been active . Bertie had gathered a squadron of available ships which he ordered to blockade the French Indian Ocean islands and probe them for weaknesses that would assist future invasion attempts . The force was led by Commodore Josias Rowley in HMS Raisonnable and mainly consisted of frigates , in roughly equivalent numbers to the French force under Hamelin . Rowley 's first significant operation was the successful Raid on Saint Paul on 21 September 1809 .

= = Hamelin 's cruise = =

In July 1809 , Hamelin had departed Île de France for the Bay of Bengal in Vénus , accompanied by the corvette Créole and the frigate Manche . The frigates were both armed with at least 40 cannon each and the corvette 14 . All three ships were crewed by a full complement of experienced sailors drawn from the pool of unemployed men stranded in Île de France by the British blockade . This force was followed a month later by the similarly sized frigate Bellone . Hamelin 's early cruises were successful : operating initially off the Nicobar Islands , Vénus captured the HEIC armed ship Orient on 26 July . After this however , targets became scarcer and despite the capture of a number of small merchant vessels , Hamelin was forced to take his squadron further east and south to find British shipping to attack . On 10 October , he raided the small trading port of Tappanooly on Sumatra , captured its British population and razed the town .

At 06 : 00 on 18 November 1809 , with the sailing season almost at an end , Hamelin finally

encountered a sizable target . Cruising in Vénus , accompanied by Manche and Créole , Hamelin sighted and chased a northwards @-@ bound convoy of East Indiamen . These three ships were the Windham , Charlton and United Kingdom , under the command of Captain John Stewart on Windham . Stewart 's ships had departed Britain months earlier , destined for Calcutta to receive cargoes for Britain . Their main cargo on this voyage were over 200 passengers , primarily soldiers enlisted in the army of the HEIC . All three vessels weighed approximately 800 tons and carried between 20 and 30 cannon each , but were not warships : their crews were not trained to military standards and their guns were not as powerful as those typically carried on military vessels . In addition , a large proportion of the crew were lascars , who were not considered reliable in combat . Stewart however had been warned of Hamelin 's presence by the sloop HMS Rattlesnake a week earlier and had been rehearsing Windham 's gunnery in case he should meet the French squadron . Ship for ship , the East Indiamen were outclassed by the French frigates , which were faster , stronger , more powerful and better armed and manned . In convoy however the British were still a formidable target : only four years earlier , at the Battle of Pulo Aura , a convoy of East Indiamen had defeated and pursued a more powerful French squadron under Admiral Linois in similar waters .

= = Engagement = =

The French squadron had become disorganised in its initial pursuit the British , with Manche , under Captain Jean Dornal de Guy , falling substantially to leeward of the flagship . Seeing this , Stewart realised that the best hope his convoy had of survival was to unite and attack Manche together . The combined batteries of the East Indiamen could be deployed en masse , hopefully inflicting enough damage to drive Manche away and discourage Hamelin in Vénus from attacking alone . Signalling his intentions to the captains of Charlton and United Kingdom , Stewart turned towards Vénus and bore down on her . Hamelin , realising the threat his scattered squadron faced , signalled for his ships to join up . With the wind against him however , it was obvious that Windham would reach Manche first .

By 08 : 00 , it was clear that despite his vessels speed , Stewart 's plan was going to fail : the captains of Charlton and United Kingdom had not even attempted to join his advance , deliberately checking their advance towards the French , falling far behind Windham . Although Stewart now faced overwhelming odds , he had no option but to continue the attack : his ship was now too close to attempt to flee from the French frigate . Captain Dornal de Guy opened fire at 09 : 30 , his shot repeatedly striking Windham as she approached . Stewart did not return fire , instead waiting until his ship was closer to minimise the inaccuracy of his gunnery . Unable to reach the more nimble French ship directly , Stewart absorbed the French fire until he was as close as he was able before unleashing his guns . The results were disappointing : the entire broadside splashed into the sea far short of the French ship . The more manoeuvrable Manche now approached Windham at close range , and the two ships fired at one another for over an hour , Stewart still unsupported by his companions , who did no more than fire the occasional ineffective shot at extreme range .

At 12 : 00 , Dornal de Guy on Manche pulled away from her battered opponent , obeying Hamelin 's order to join with his flagship . Hamelin then sent Manche and Créole after the slow Charlton and United Kingdom , using Vénus to chase Windham . Stewart had used the break in the action to effect rudimentary repairs to his battered ship and , with the agreement of his officers , determined to abandon the other ships and escape alone . Manche and the corvette rapidly overhauled and captured Charlton and United Kingdom , their captains Charles Mortlock and William D 'Esterre making no serious attempt to resist or escape . Vénus however became embroiled in a lengthy chase as Stewart threw all not essential stores overboard in an effort to make his ship lighter and faster . For five days , Windham led Vénus in pursuit across the Bay of Bengal and it was not until 10 : 30 on 22 November that Hamelin finally closed with the British ship and forced her surrender .

= = Return to Île de France = =

Bellone , under Captain Guy @-@ Victor Duperré , had been sailing independently of Hamelin 's squadron and had also had a successful cruise , capturing the small British warship HMS Victor on 2 November and the 48 @-@ gun Portuguese frigate Minerve on 22 November in the northern Bay of Bengal , before sailing back to Île de France . To the south , Hamelin and Dornal de Guy reunited with their prizes on 6 December and also determined to return to Île de France as the cyclone season , in which any ship in the Indian Ocean would be at serious risk of destruction by a sudden tropical cyclone , was fast approaching . This was a dangerous time to be at sea : the year before seven large East Indiamen had sunk with a thousand lives in two major hurricanes and the year before that , the flagship of Sir Thomas Troubridge , HMS Blenheim had disappeared without a trace in similar circumstances ,

On 19 December , the first winter storm struck the French squadron . In the heavy waves and high winds , first Windham and then Vénus were separated from the convoy , Manche marshalling the remaining ships and continuing the southwards journey . Windham 's French prize crew were able to regain control of their ship and continued on to Île de France alone , but Vénus was struck by an even larger hurricane on 27 December and lost all three topmasts in the gale . The French crew panicked as the storm began , and refused to attend to the sails or even close the hatches : as a result the vessel almost foundered as huge amounts of water poured into the ship . In desperation , Hamelin called Captain Stewart to his cabin and requested that his men save the ship but demanded that Stewart give his word that his men would not attempt to escape or seize the frigate . Stewart refused to give any such guarantee but agreed to help repair the damage and bring the ship to safety . After securing the weapons lockers aboard , Hamelin agreed and Stewart and his men cut away the wrecked masts and pumped the water out of the hold , repairing the ship so that she was able to continue her journey without fear of foundering .

On 31 December , the battered Vénus docked in Rivière Noire and Stewart and his men , who had never had an opportunity to seize their freedom , were marched to Port Louis , where they witnessed the arrival of Manche , accompanied by Créole , Charlton and United Kingdom on 1 January 1810 . For their services , Stewart and his fellow prisoners were later released and allowed to sail to the Cape of Good Hope . There they discovered Windham , which had failed to arrive at Île de France . Although her prize crew had retained control of the ship following the storm , they had been sighted , chased and seized within sight of Île de France on 29 December by the newly arrived British frigate HMS Magicienne under Captain Lucius Curtis . Bellone and her prizes arrived at Port Louis on 2 January , having slipped past Rowley 's blockade during a period of calm weather .

= = Aftermath = =

Casualties in the battle were minimal , the British losing four killed and two wounded while the French recorded no casualties at all . The significance of the action lies in the ease with which French frigates operating from Île de France were able to attack and capture vital trade convoys without facing serious opposition . The action of 18 November was the second occasion in 1809 in which a British East India convoy was destroyed and another would be lost at the Action of 3 July 1810 the following year . These losses were exceptionally heavy , especially when combined with the 12 East Indiamen wrecked during 1809 , and would eventually provoke the massive buildup of British forces in late 1810 . Despite the French success Vénus was never again able to operate independently in this manner . Hamelin was needed during 1810 to operate against the strong British frigate squadrons that returned in the spring to harass his cruisers and prepare for the planned invasions of Île Bonaparte and Île de France using the soldiers stationed on Rodriguez . The French commodore was ultimately unable to prevent these operations and was eventually captured in the Action of 18 September 1810 , a personal engagement with Rowley on HMS Boadicea .