

= Action of 27 June 1798 =

The Action of 27 June 1798 was a minor naval engagement between British and French frigates in the Strait of Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea . The engagement formed part of a wider campaign , in which a major French convoy sailed from Toulon to Alexandria at the start of the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt . The French frigate *Sensible* had been detached from the convoy after the capture of Malta , under orders to carry wounded soldiers and looted treasure back to France while the main body continued to Egypt . The British frigate *HMS Seahorse* was one of a number of vessels detached from the main British Mediterranean Fleet in the Tagus River , sent to augment the fleet under Sir Horatio Nelson that was actively hunting the French convoy .

Lookouts on *Seahorse* spotted *Sensible* at 16 : 00 on 26 June and Captain Edward Foote immediately gave chase , the French frigate fleeing southwards . For 12 hours the pursuit continued until Foote was able to catch and defeat his opponent , inflicting heavy casualties on the weaker and overladen French frigate . Among the prisoners captured was General Louis Baraguey d 'Hilliers who had been wounded in the storming of Malta , and among the treasure was an ornate seventeenth century cannon once owned by Louis XIV . The captured *Sensible* was initially fitted out as an active warship , but on arrival in Britain in 1799 the ship was downgraded to a transport . The action provided the British with the first conclusive evidence of the French intention to invade Egypt , but despite an extensive search for Nelson 's fleet Foote was unable to relay the location of the French to his admiral before the Battle of the Nile on 1 August .

= = Background = =

On 19 May 1798 , a French fleet departed Toulon for a top secret destination . The force consisted of 22 warships and 120 transports , to be joined by additional forces from Genoa , Corsica and Civitavecchia as it passed south through the Ligurian Sea . The fleet 's target was Egypt , a territory nominally controlled by the Ottoman Empire that French General Napoleon Bonaparte considered an ideal springboard for operations against British India . Passing southwards without interference from the Royal Navy , which had been absent from the Mediterranean for over a year following the outbreak of war between Britain and Spain , Bonaparte 's convoy passed Sicily on 7 June and two days later was at anchor off the harbour of Valletta on Malta . The island nation of Malta was under the command of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem , a religious order that depended on France for much of its wealth and recruits . Bonaparte believed that capturing Malta was essential to controlling the Central Mediterranean , and when Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim refused the fleet entry to the harbour , Bonaparte responded with a large scale invasion . The knights put up no resistance , although fighting against native Maltese troops lasted for 24 hours until the central city of Mdina fell . With this defeat the knights withdrew to their fortress at Valletta but were persuaded to surrender the following day with promises of pensions and estates in France .

With Malta secure , Bonaparte seized the Maltese army and navy , adding them to his own forces . He garrisoned Valletta and among the wealth he appropriated from the island was the entire property of the Roman Catholic Church in the island . Much of this was auctioned off , while other treasures were to be transported to France , along with dispatches carried by the wounded General Louis Baraguey d 'Hilliers and other soldiers wounded during the invasion . On 19 June Bonaparte divided his forces , leaving 4 @, @ 000 men to hold the island while the remainder of the convoy embarked on the second leg of the journey to Egypt . One ship was detailed to return to France with the wounded , despatches and some of the treasure . For this purpose the 36 @-@ gun frigate *Sensible* under Captain G. F. J. Bourdé was selected , although much of the regular crew was removed and replaced with freed Maltese galley slaves .

Although Bonaparte had not expected British interference in his operations against Egypt , the Royal Navy had responded to the reports of French mobilisation on the south coast by despatching a small squadron to the Ligurian Sea under Rear @-@ Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson . Arriving on 21 May , Nelson 's squadron was struck by a severe storm and was forced to make hasty repairs off

Sardinia . The storm had also dispersed the squadron 's frigates , leaving Nelson with only three ships of the line . Although he was reinforced by another ten ships of the line and a fourth rate on 7 June , he still lacked any scouts and was thus severely hampered in his ability to search for information on French operations . The detached frigates had been scattered across the Western Mediterranean , and were unable to locate either the British or the French fleets . Reinforcements sent by Vice @-@ Admiral Earl St Vincent at the Tagus River suffered from the same problem , the frigates spreading out widely in their search but failing to discover either of the main British or French forces , which were rapidly sailing southeastwards towards Alexandria .

= = Battle = =

One of the British reinforcements cruising in the Central Mediterranean in June was the frigate HMS Seahorse , commanded by Captain Edward Foote . Seahorse was officially rated as a 38 @-@ gun ship , but in reality carried 46 guns , including 14 32 @-@ pounder carronades , very heavy short @-@ range cannon . Foote had been despatched by Earl St. Vincent to join Nelson 's squadron in his hunt for the French and carried on board a number of reinforcements for HMS Culloden , one of Nelson 's ships commanded by Captain Thomas Troubridge . On 26 June 1798 , Seahorse was passing along the southern Sicilian coast in search of information about the whereabouts of the British fleet when at 16 : 00 his lookout sighted a ship . Advancing rapidly , Foote recognised the stranger as a French frigate and prepared for battle . The frigate was Sensible , which was on a northeasterly course from Malta to Toulon when sighted . Bourdé , knowing that his ship was overladen , undermanned and carried only 36 guns , some of which were only 6 @-@ pounders , turned away and sailed south , hoping to outrun his opponent during the night .

For 12 hours Sensible fled southwards , but Foote 's pursuit was relentless and Bourdé found the distance between his frigate and Seahorse gradually disappearing . At 04 : 00 on 27 July , with the island of Pantelleria 36 miles (58 km) to the northwest , Foote was able to pull Seahorse alongside his opponent and open a heavy fire from close range . At the first shots , many of the galley slaves deserted their positions and fled below decks , leaving the French ship dangerously exposed . Within eight minutes Sensible was battered into submission , Bourdé 's desperate attempt to board Seahorse easily avoided by Foote . The French frigate received 36 cannon shot in the hull and significant damage to the masts . Casualty estimates vary , but between 18 and 25 men were killed and 35 to 55 were wounded from a total of approximately 300 . Seahorse by contrast suffered only light damage , losing two men dead and 16 , including first Lieutenant Wilmot , wounded .

Foote removed much of the treasure and prisoners from Sensible before despatching the vessel under a prize crew to Earl St. Vincent in the Tagus . Among the goods seized from the frigate were copies of the French naval code books , as well as information about the destination of Bonaparte 's invasion fleet . Sailing immediately for Alexandria , Foote was joined soon afterwards by HMS Terpsichore under Captain William Hall Gage , who was also searching for Nelson . Together they reached Alexandria on 21 July , discovering that the French were already in the harbour although Nelson was nowhere to be seen . Observing the French dispositions , Foote and Gage disguised their ships as a French frigate and its prize , Gage hoisting French colours over British to indicate that his ship had been captured and Foote displaying the secret French recognition codes . This appears to have convinced the French that the strangers were not enemy ships , and no move was made against them , Foote and Gage free to observe the French anchorage in Aboukir Bay before striking out along the African coast in search of Nelson . The British admiral was at this time resupplying his ships at Syracuse on Sicily , and when he sailed on 25 July he passed eastwards to Morea where he learned of the French invasion of Egypt from the Turkish governor of Coron . Striking directly southwards , Nelson arrived at Aboukir Bay on 1 August without ever encountering Foote or learning his intelligence . Seahorse eventually returned to Alexandria on 17 August to discover that Nelson had fought and won the Battle of the Nile nearly three weeks earlier .

= = Aftermath = =

Earl St Vincent was suffering from an extreme shortage of frigates , and on the arrival of Sensible at the Tagus immediately ordered the frigate to be commissioned as HMS Sensible , stripping six men from each of his ships to man her and turning the frigate into an active warship in just 12 hours . For a year Sensible remained with St. Vincent , until she was sent back to Britain in November 1799 . On arrival the ship was downgraded from frontline service , but did spend several years commissioned as a military transport until wrecked off Ceylon on 3 March 1802 . Among the treasures removed from the ship was a decorated brass cannon captured from the Ottomans in the seventeenth century and presented to the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem by King Louis XIV of France , as well as a model of a galley made from gilt silver . These were sold , along with the other cargo and ships fittings at Sheerness in November 1799 , the prize money shares subsequently awarded to the crew of Seahorse .

General d 'Hilliers and the other prisoners were taken to Britain , but the officers were soon paroled . On their return to France , d 'Hilliers and Bourdé were court martialled and initially condemned by the Minister of Marine Étienne Eustache Bruix . Bruix believed that the ship had been too easily surrendered and publicly released a strongly worded letter criticising their " talents and courage " . This level of criticism , which British naval historian William James considers excessive , was eventually toned down and after a spirited defence by d 'Hilliers both officers were honourably acquitted . Foote was praised for his success , and Lieutenant Wilmot , who successfully carried the frigate to the Tagus , was promoted . Foote later commanded Seahorse off Naples , and became embroiled in the controversy that surrounded the execution of the leaders of the Parthenopean Republic in 1799 .