

= Robert Surcouf =

Robert Surcouf (12 December 1773 ? 8 July 1827) was a French privateer and slave trader who operated in the Indian Ocean between 1789 and 1801 , and again from 1807 to 1808 , capturing over 40 prizes , while amassing a large fortune as a ship @-@ owner , both from privateering and from commerce for a time .

Surcouf started his career as a sailor and officer on the slave ships *Aurore* , *Courrier d 'Afrique* and *Navigateur* . Having risen to Captain , and in spite of the prohibition of slave trading by the National Convention in 1793 , he engaged in the business himself as a captain on *Créole* . He then captained the merchantman *Émilie* , on which he engaged in commerce raiding despite lacking a letter of marque . He preyed on British shipping , capturing the East Indiaman *Triton* , before returning to Île de France , where his prizes were confiscated . He then returned to France , where he obtained prize money from the government .

Returning to the Indian Ocean , Surcouf captained the privateers *Clarisse* and *Confiance* , raiding British , American and Portuguese merchantmen . He captured the East Indiaman *Kent* on 7 October 1800 . Returning to France , he was awarded the Legion of Honour and settled as a ship @-@ owner .

He briefly returned to the Indian Ocean in 1807 on the custom @-@ built *Revenant* before returning to France . There , he armed privateers and merchantmen . His privateers led successful campaigns against the British in the Indian Ocean and disastrous ones in the English Channel , except for *Renard* which achieved fame in her very costly victory over *HMS Alpheia* on 9 September 1812 which exploded after repulsing French attempts at boarding it causing many casualties . After the Bourbon restoration , he organised fishing expeditions to *Terre @-@ Neuve* and amassed a considerable fortune . He died in 1827 and is buried in a graveyard at Saint @-@ Malo .

= = Career = =

= = = Youth = = =

Robert Surcouf was born 12 December 1773 in Saint @-@ Malo to a family of ship @-@ owners . His father , Charles @-@ Ange Surcouf de Boisgris , was the grandson of Robert Surcouf de Maisonneuve , who had captained the privateer *Aimable* during the reign of Louis XIV . On his mother 's side , Robert was a distant relative of René Duguay @-@ Trouin . When his parents sent him to Dinan college to become a priest , he fled at age thirteen to enlist on the merchantman *Héron* , which shuttled between Saint @-@ Malo and Cadiz .

On 3 March 1789 , he enlisted as a volunteer on the 700 @-@ ton *Aurore* , under Captain Tardivet , a slave ship bound for India . *Aurore* sailed to Pondicherry and ferried troops bound for Isle de France . On her next journey , seeking to purchase slaves on the Horn of Africa , *Aurore* was wrecked in Mozambique Channel , drowning 400 black slaves chained in the orlop . Tardivet chartered the Portugues *San Antoine* in October 1790 to return to Port @-@ Louis , but had to divert to Sumatra because of the weather , and only returned to Port @-@ Louis in late 1790 , on a French ship via the French colony of Pondicherry . Promoted to officer , Surcouf enlisted on the *Courrier d 'Afrique* , another slave ship , bound for Mozambique under Captain Garnier . Captain Tardivet then brought him over as Lieutenant on his new ship , *Revanche* . On *Revanche* , Surcouf made several expeditions off Madagascar .

Surcouf enlisted as a helmsman on the French Royal Navy 's 20 @-@ gun fluyt *Bienvenue* , under Lieutenant Haumont , bound for France . *Bienvenue* arrived at Lorient on 2 January 1792 , where Surcouf discovered the political changes France had undergone in the wake of the French Revolution .

After six months , Surcouf enlisted as a lieutenant on the slave ship *Navigateur* , under Captain Lejoliff . She departed on 27 August 1792 for Mozambique before sailing to Isle de France , where Surcouf was informed on his arrival of the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars .

Rising to the rank of captain , Surcouf took command of the brig Créole , a four @-@ gun slave ship . He departed Isle de France on 3 June 1794 for a journey off Africa and Madagascar , and engaged again in slave trading , even though it had been prohibited by the National Convention and the Assembly of Île Bourbon . Upon his return to Isle de France , agents of the Committee of Public Safety inspected Créole for evidence of slave trading , but left empty @-@ handed as Surcouf had already sold his slaves . When British naval forces arrived to blockade Isle de France , he served as an auxiliary ensign on the 40 @-@ gun frigate Cybèle and participated in the Action of 22 October 1794 .

= = = Cruise of Émilie and capture of Triton = = =

In the spring in 1795 , Surcouf took command of the 180 @-@ ton , privateer schooner Modeste , renamed Émilie , with a 32 @-@ man crew and four 6 @-@ pounder guns , armed by Malroux and Levillant . Governor Malartic refused to provide a lettre de marque and ordered Émilie to go to the Seychelles to purchase tortoises as food for Isle de France .

Émilie departed on 3 September 1795 with a congé de navigation authorising her to defend herself , but not to take prizes as a privateer . The next day , she made a port call at Saint @-@ Denis before cruising to Mahé . At Sainte Anne Island , two large British ships chased him , but he was able to evade them by sailing through the reefs , at night .

Surcouf then decided to sail to the Mergui Archipelago to load a rice cargo . On 8 December 1795 , while in transit , cruising off the Ganges Delta , Surcouf captured his first prized , the ship Penguin , loaded with lumber , on which he detached a prize crew under Lieutenant Péru before sending her to Isle de France .

On 19 January 1796 , Surcouf met the pilot ship Cartier leading two merchantmen , the Russel and Sambolasse , through the Ganges delta . He attacked and captured them , finding the merchantmen to be carrying rice . After detaching prize crews , Surcouf transferred his command , along with his remaining 22 crew members and Émilie 's four guns , to Cartier , which (according to Ambroise Louis Garneray) he renamed Hasard . Surcouf then sent Émilie , under Lieutenant Croizet , together with his prizes , to Isle de France .

On the night of 28 January , Surcouf captured the 12 @-@ gun Diana , loaded with 6000 bags of rice . The next day , Cartier met a 26 @-@ gun Indiaman , the Triton , armed with 12 @-@ pounders and a 150 @-@ man crew ; having decided to attack , and recognising only too late the overwhelming superiority of his opponent , Surcouf , feeling threatened and unable to flee , decided to board her with his 26 men . After haranguing his men , he approached under a British flag , before hoisting French colours at the very last moment and launching a violent assault . In the ensuing 45 @-@ minute battle , Triton suffered 5 wounded and 10 killed , including her captain , Captain Burnycat , and the first officer , Picket ; The prisoners were transferred to Diana , which Surcouf released against a 30 @,@ 000 rupee ransom .

Surcouf returned to Ile de France with his prizes , where he arrived on 10 March 1796 , although Hasard was captured by HMS Victorious on the journey back . As Émilie had been armed as a merchant rather than a privateer , the Prize court seized her prizes and sold them for the benefit of the State , although their capture was declared to be legal . Surcouf returned to France to claim his prize money , and on 3 September 1797 , the government finally granted him 660 @,@ 000 francs , of which he only received 80 @,@ 000 .

= = = Cruise of Clarisse = = =

In early 1798 , after 14 months in Paris , Surcouf took command of the Clarisse , a 14 @-@ gun privateer brig armed with four 12 @-@ pounders , ten 8 @-@ pounders , and manned by a 120 @-@ strong complement . He departed from Paimboeuf Nantes in February 1798 , this time with a proper lettre de marque . During the journey to Isle de France , Clarisse chased a British slave ship , which escaped after one of her shots cut off Clarisse ' s foremast tops . Surcouf captured a British brig South of Cape of Good Hope , which surrendered at the warning shot , on which he sent a prize

crew under Captain Dujardin , and arrived La Réunion on 5 December .

In early 1799 , Surcouf sailed to the city of Susoh in Aceh , on Sumatra , where he found two 20 @-@ gun merchantmen anchored in the harbour , in the process of loading pepper ; Clarisse dropped anchor close by and opened fire , after which Surcouf sent his older brother Nicolas to head a 20 @-@ man board party on Clarisse ' s boats and board the largest of the ships , while he boarded her with Clarisse from the opposite side ; assaulted from two sides , she surrendered after a 30 @-@ minute battle . The other ship cut her anchor and attempted to flee , but she was overhauled by the boats of Clarisse and captured without resistance , most of her crew being ashore . Surcouf returned to Île de France with his prizes in June .

On 16 August , Clarisse departed Isle de France for another cruise ; she sailed to La Réunion carrying despatches of Malartic to the governor . She then cruised to Java to procure water , where she arrived on 27 September . On 1 October , Surcouf captured a Danish merchantman , which he sent away under Lieutenant Fonroc ; on 4 November , the Portuguese merchantman Nostra Signora de la Conception carrying 116 000 piastres ; on 6 , a British ship laden with a salt cargo ; and on 11 November , the 20 @-@ gun Auspicious , with a cargo worth 1 @, @ 032 @, @ 580 francs .

Surcouf sailed to Mergui to purchase food and free his prisoners , and put to sail on 10 December . En route , he met the fellow French privateer Malartic , under Jean Dutertre ; soon after , the privateers met a British frigate , 38 @-@ gun frigate HMS Sybille , which gave chase and which Surcouf managed to outsail by throwing eight guns overboard , along with various other implements .

On 1 January 1800 , Clarisse captured a large rice @-@ laden merchantman , the British James . On 3 January , she detected two American 16 @-@ carronade ships forming a line of battle ; although Clarisse lacked the eight guns sacrificed to escape Sybille and 60 of her men detached on her various prizes , Surcouf engaged . Clarisse raked the rear @-@ most ship , the Louisa , and boarded her , while simultaneously firing a broadside on the other ship , Mercury , which attempted to rescue her mate . Nicolas Surcouf led a 30 @-@ man boarding party to seize Louisa , while Mercury escaped . Clarisse could not give chase , her bowsprit having been destroyed in the collision with Louisa . Nicolas Surcouf took a prize crew and sailed Louisa back to Port Louis .

Clarisse continued her patrol , capturing the ships Catherine , Haderbux , Anna Maria , Nostra Signora de la Cruz , Louis , Janna , Notre Dame de Bon Succès and Albion , before sailing back to Isle de France with her prizes . She arrived in early February 1800 .

= = = Cruise of Confiance and capture of Kent = = =

In May 1800 , Surcouf took command of Confiance , a fast 18 @-@ gun brig from Bordeaux , with a 150 @-@ man complement ; the competition with Dutertre for the captainship of Confiance almost degenerated into a duel , and Governor Malartic had to intervene to prevent it , stating that such a confrontation would be " an English victory " . The sailor and painter Ambroise Louis Garneray , future biographer of Surcouf , enlisted at this time .

In late April 1800 , Confiance cruised off Sunda Strait , where she captured the American ship ; she then left the strait to avoid the US frigate Essex which was known to cruise in these waters , and sailed to the Seychelles . There , he escaped a British ship of the line and a frigate , and sailed on to cruise the Bay of Bengal .

On 19 September , Confiance captured the Prize , from Calcutta , which has stored eight of her ten guns in her hold to improve her stability . Prize was sent off to Mauritius on the next day with an 85 @-@ man prize crew . Surcouf then steered for Ganjam , where he captured three smaller ships .

On 7 October 1800 , off Sand Heads , near Calcutta , Confiance met the 40 @-@ gun East Indiaman Kent , of 824 tons burthen , under Captain Robert Rivington . Kent had rescued the crew of another ship , the Queen , destroyed by fire , and therefore had an exceptionally large complement of 437 men , including her passengers ; 300 of them were soldiers and sailors ; Surcouf managed to board his larger opponent and , after over an hour and a half of battle across the decks of the ship , seize control of the Kent .

The British had fourteen killed , including the captain , and 44 wounded , while the French suffered

five killed and ten wounded . The privateers were then granted one hour of free pillaging on Kent before Surcouf restored order ; however , the female passengers were strictly protected and sentries were placed in front of their apartments . Amongst the prisoners were General Frederick St. John and his wife , Arabella Craven .

The first officer of Confiance , Joachim Drieux , was sent on Kent with a 60 @-@ man prize crew , while her passengers were released on a merchantman that Surcouf stopped a few days later . Confiance and Kent arrived at the Rade des Pavillons in Port @-@ Louis in November . The capture of Kent became a sensation , and the British Admiralty promised a reward for the capture of Surcouf .

After her return to Ile de France , Confiance was armed as a merchantman en aventurier with an 89 @-@ man crew and loaded with colonial goods for her return to France . On the journey , Surcouf still managed to capture a number of ships , notably the Portuguese Ebre , with eighteen 12 @-@ pounder carronades and a 60 @-@ man crew ; he released her against a ransom of 10 @,@ 000 piastres and after exchanging her greatmast with that of Confiance .

Upon her return , Confiance ran into the British blockade and was chased by a frigate ; Surcouf managed to evade her by throwing overboard all but one of her guns , his boats , anchors , chains and even components of his masts . He eventually arrived at La Rochelle on 13 April 1801 .

In France , Navy Minister Truguet attempted to enrol Surcouf in the Navy as an auxiliary officer , which he declined . Hennequin states that Bonaparte himself offered him the rank of Captain and the command of two frigates , which Surcouf declined for fear of losing his freedom of action , and awarded him a Sabre of honour . Surcouf was awarded the Legion of Honour at the founding of the Order , on 19 May 1802 .

On 28 May , in Saint @-@ Malo , he married Marie Blaize , who had been his fiancée for two years ; over the course of their marriage , they had five children together . Around 1805 , Surcouf started to arm privateers in Saint @-@ Malo in partnership with his father @-@ in @-@ law Louis Blaize de Maisonneuve , notably Caroline which captured four ships in the Indian Ocean under Nicolas Surcouf ; Marsouin ; and Confiance , which took two prizes under Joseph Potier .

= = = Cruise of Revenant = = =

After a five @-@ year retirement , in early 1807 , Surcouf ordered the 18 @-@ gun Revenant , a privateer which he had built on his own specifications . On 2 March , he departed Saint @-@ Malo with a 192 @-@ man crew to cruise off Bengal . On 9 March 1807 , while en route , off Madeira , Revenant captured the British slave ship Aun , of sixteen 12 @-@ pounders , recently departed from Liverpool , which Surcouf let go for a ransom , after throwing her guns overboard , wetting her gunpowder and destroying some of her sails .

Surcouf arrived at Île de France in June , defeating the British blockade and capturing several ships on the journey . During the subsequent campaign , which was to be his last , Surcouf captured 16 British ships , partly because British ships tended strike their colours as soon as they realised their opponent was Surcouf .

The arrival of Surcouf at Isle de France did not go unnoticed : the authorities and the population reacted with enthusiasm , while British insurance companies on Calcutta doubled the reward for his capture , which amounted to one rupee lake , or 250 @,@ 000 francs . On 3 September 1807 , Revenant departed to cruise off Bengal . On 25 September , she captured the British 12 @-@ gun Trafalgar carrying 10 @,@ 000 bags of rice , and the 14 @-@ gun Mangles , carrying 11 @,@ 000 ; on the 27th , the 12 @-@ gun Admiral Applin , with 9 @,@ 500 bags of rice ; on 1 October , the 1 @-@ gun Suzannah , with 5 @,@ 500 bags of rice ; on the 19th , the wood @-@ laden Success , which was burnt ; on the 30th , the 12 @-@ gun Fortune , which carried no cargo and was sunk ; on 15 November , the Indian Macaulay ; on 18 December , the British 10 @-@ gun Sir William Burrough ; on the 30th , the Portuguese Oriente ; and on 6 January 1808 , the Arab Jem lab Dim . Surcouf sent these with prize crews to Isle de France , and then returned himself on 31 January 1808 .

When a British captive officer challenged Surcouf with the words " You French fight for money while we fight for honour " , Surcouf replied " Each of us fights for what he lacks most " .

Surcouf then gave command of Revenant to his first officer , Joseph Potier . After a short cruise , Potier returned with a 34 @-@ gun prize of the Portuguese East India Company , the Conceção de Santo Antonio , captured after a one @-@ hour fight .

On 4 July 1808 , Revenant was requisitioned by order of General Decaen , governor of Isle de France . She was renamed léna , and command given to Lieutenant Morice , with Lieutenant de vaisseau Albin Roussin as second officer . Surcouf had an altercation with Decaen but had to renounce his ship . He eventually purchased the Sémillante , which he renamed Charles . Returning with this vessel to Saint @-@ Malo , he arrived on 4 February 1809 .

= = = Late life = = =

From 1809 , Surcouf went into business as ship @-@ owner , and over the years , he armed a number of privateers : Auguste , under Pelletier ; Dorade ; Biscayenne ; Édouard ; Espadon ; Ville @-@ de @-@ Caen ; Adolphe and his last , the Renard , under Leroux . The British captured all the privateers sent into the Channel , with the exception of Renard .

In January 1814 , Surcouf was made a colonel in the National Guard of Saint @-@ Malo . During the Hundred Days , he served as a chief of Legion and maintained order . He resigned after the Battle of Waterloo and became a merchant , arming 19 merchantmen and establishing business with Newfoundland .

Surcouf died on 8 July 1827 , and was buried in Saint @-@ Malo graveyard with military honours . His tomb features a globe showing the Indian Ocean and an anchor , with the epitaph :

= = Legacy = =

Five ships of the French Navy were named in honour of Surcouf : a steam aviso (sloop) ; an armoured cruiser ; a submarine cruiser , which at the time of her launch was the largest submarine in the world , joined the Free French Naval Forces during the Second World War , and disappeared mysteriously after liberating Saint @-@ Pierre and Miquelon ; a large fleet escort destroyer , which was heavily damaged in a collision with a Soviet ship ; and the present @-@ day stealth frigate , one of the first stealth combat ships .

A number of legends have grown around Surcouf over the time : he is often stated to have been made a Baron of the Empire , which is untrue . Another legend states that Surcouf had thrown overboard gold seized on Kent ; in fact , Kent did not carry gold .

There is a tale that in 1816 , Surcouf challenged twelve Prussian officers to a duel and defeated all of them except for the last , which he let go " to tell in his country how a former soldier of Napoleon fights " ; this story has been debunked .