

= Action of 1 January 1800 =

The Action of 1 January 1800 was a naval battle of the Quasi @-@ War that took place off the coast of present @-@ day Haiti , near the island of Gonâve in the Bight of Léogâne . The battle was fought between an American convoy of four merchant vessels escorted by the United States naval schooner USS Experiment , and a squadron of armed barges manned by Haitians known as picaroons .

A French @-@ aligned Haitian general , André Rigaud , had instructed his forces to attack all foreign shipping within their range of operations . Accordingly , once Experiment and her convoy of merchant ships neared Gonâve , the picaroons attacked them , capturing two of the American merchant ships before withdrawing . Experiment managed to save the other two ships in her convoy , and escorted them to a friendly port . On the American side , only the captain of the schooner Mary was killed . Though the picaroons took heavy losses during this engagement , they remained strong enough to continue wreaking havoc among American shipping in the region . Only after Rigaud was forced out of power by the forces of Toussaint L 'Ouverture , leader of the 1791 Haitian Revolution , did the picaroon attacks cease .

= = Background = =

With the dawn of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 , a successful slave rebellion on the French colony , then known as Saint @-@ Domingue , allowed the local population to gain control over the government . Despite their success in removing the French colonial authorities , the various political factions that had seized control of the colony were fractious , and fighting soon broke out among them . By 1800 , the War of Knives between the pro @-@ French André Rigaud and the pro @-@ autonomy Toussaint L 'Ouverture was in full swing and Saint @-@ Domingue was divided in two . Rigaud controlled part of the southern portion of Saint @-@ Domingue while L 'Ouverture controlled the rest of the French colony . In need of supplies and materiel , Rigaud 's forces attacked any non @-@ French ship that passed them .

Concurrently with the War of Knives , the United States and France were engaged in a bout of limited naval warfare in the Caribbean as part of the Quasi @-@ War . In late December 1799 the American armed schooner Experiment was escorting under convoy the brig Daniel and Mary and the schooners Sea Flower , Mary , and Washington to prevent their capture by French privateers . On 1 January 1800 , the convoy was caught in a dead calm off the north side of the present @-@ day Haitian island of Gonâve , in the Bight of Leogane . Seeing the convoy becalmed , Rigaud sent eleven armed barges out to attack and seize the American vessels .

The crews of the American merchant vessels possessed only small arms , but their escort , Experiment , was a much more powerful vessel . Commanded by William Maley , the 135 @-@ ton Experiment was armed with 12 six @-@ pounder guns and had a complement of 70 men . In comparison , Rigaud 's initial attack force consisted of eleven barges crewed by 40 to 50 men each in the smaller ones , and 60 or 70 in the larger vessels . These barges were primarily propelled by oars , with 26 per vessel . The Haitian craft were each equipped with a mix of swivel guns and four @-@ pounder cannon , with most vessels armed with two or three guns as well as small arms . In addition to the vessels that set out to attack the convoy , there were more barges and men nearby that the Haitians could call upon if reinforcements were needed . In total some 37 barges and 1500 men were at Rigaud 's immediate disposal , though the Americans did not know this during the attack . Individually the Haitian barges presented only a small threat to the convoy , but when attacking en masse they could easily overwhelm and capture the American ships if they managed to board them .

= = Battle = =

Experiment kept her gunports closed and passed herself off as a merchantman , while the Haitians sailed closer to the convoy with the intent of boarding and capturing all five vessels . Once the

Haitians were in musket range of the American vessels they opened fire on them , and Experiment returned the fire . Grapeshot from the Americans wreaked havoc among the Haitian barges and they were forced to withdraw . They stood off the American convoy for thirty minutes before beaching at the nearby island of Gonâve to land their wounded and gather reinforcements . With three more barges and fresh crews , the picaroons set off to assault the American convoy once more . They divided themselves into three squadrons of four barges each and set course to attack Experiment . The lead and centermost divisions attacked the sides of the American warship while the rear division assaulted the stern . During the lull in fighting Experiment had readied herself for the picaroons ' next assault by positioning musketeers in defensive positions , loading her main guns , and raising boarding nets . Thus , when the Haitians attacked the American warship again she was well prepared to repulse any attempt at boarding her .

For three hours , Experiment battled the barges , sinking two and killing a great many of the picaroons . During this time two of the barges left the warship and attacked the merchant ships . These barges managed to protect themselves from Experiment by sailing behind the schooner Mary , which was between the two barges and the warship . The Haitians boarded Mary and killed her captain . Many of the crew jumped into the sea , and the rest hid in the hold . The second barge attempted to take Daniel and Mary but was sunk by fire from Experiment . Once the Haitians had boarded Mary , Experiment opened fire upon her with grapeshot , driving the picaroons off .

The entire flotilla of Haitians once more retired to Gonâve and replaced their wounded crewmembers with fresh ones . Seeing that Daniel and Mary and Washington had drifted away from the convoy , the Haitians set out to attack them . The two civilian vessels , having drifted too far from the protection of Experiment 's guns , were abandoned by their crews and passengers who fled to the American warship . The Haitians boarded and plundered these two vessels , carrying them further away from Experiment . Experiment managed to get close enough to the barges to attack them with her cannon but could not pursue them , as two barges had broken away from the main flotilla and were positioned to take Mary and Sea Flower if Experiment left them . Eventually the remnants of the convoy managed to make it to Léogâne , where they were looked after by the American consul .

= = Aftermath = =

USS Experiment had succeeded in protecting two of the convoy , but the other two ships were taken by the picaroons . On the American side , only the captain of the schooner Mary had been killed . The Americans also suffered two wounded : one civilian , and Experiment 's second in command David Porter , who had been shot in the arm during the action . In exchange the Haitians had lost two of their barges and a great many casualties . Rigaud 's picaroons attacked another American convoy later in the year and continued to harass American shipping until Rigaud was ousted from Saint @-@ Domingue at the end of the War of Knives . After fleeing to Guadeloupe , he left for France on the schooner Diane , but was captured and taken to Saint Kitts when Experiment intercepted her on 1 October 1800 .

The action would prove controversial in the United States as several officers ' reports suggested that Lieutenant Maley , commander of Experiment , had shown cowardice during the engagement . Lieutenant Porter stated that Maley had tried to insist on surrendering to the picaroons immediately upon their arrival . It was alleged that Maley thought the situation was hopeless due to the sheer number of pro @-@ French Haitians who were attacking the convoy , and he had attempted to strike the colors .

The officers ' reports also commended Porter , stating that he had saved Experiment and her convoy by acting on his own initiative to ignore Maley 's defeatism , urging the crew to fight . Other American officials , such as the American consul at Leongé , disagreed with Porter 's accusations and instead lauded Maley for his bravery . Threats of court @-@ martial were made against Maley , but no formal charges regarding the incident were ever brought . On 16 July 1800 he was replaced as commander of Experiment by Charles Stewart . The incident haunted his career until his retirement .

