

= Action of 31 March 1800 =

The Action of 31 March 1800 was a naval engagement of the French Revolutionary Wars fought between a Royal Navy squadron and a French Navy ship of the line off Malta in the Mediterranean Sea . By March 1800 Valletta , the Maltese capital , had been under siege for eighteen months and food supplies were severely depleted , a problem exacerbated by the interception and defeat of a French replenishment convoy in mid @-@ February . In an effort to simultaneously obtain help from France and reduce the number of personnel maintained in the city , the naval commander on the island , Contre @-@ Admiral Pierre @-@ Charles Villeneuve , ordered his subordinate Contre @-@ Admiral Denis Decrès to put to sea with the large ship of the line Guillaume Tell , which had arrived in the port shortly before the siege began in September 1798 . Over 900 men were carried aboard the ship , which was to sail for Toulon under cover of darkness on 30 March .

The British had maintained a blockade off Malta since the beginning of the siege , ostensibly led by Rear @-@ Admiral Lord Nelson , who by March 1800 was defying a direct order from his superior officer Lord Keith by remaining in Palermo with his lover Emma , Lady Hamilton . In his absence the blockade was under the command of Captain Manley Dixon of HMS Lion and Nelson 's flag captain Sir Edward Berry , who were notified of Decrès ' departure by the patrolling frigate HMS Penelope and gave chase . The large ship of the line was initially only attacked by Penelope , which manoeuvred around Guillaume Tell 's stern , causing severe damage and delaying the French ship sufficiently for Berry to bring his squadron into action . Despite being heavily outnumbered , Decrès continued to fight for more than three hours , fighting off two British ships but ultimately unable to resist the combined weight of Berry 's attacks . Casualties and damage were severe on both sides , and the defiance of the French ship was celebrated in both countries as a brave defence against overwhelming odds .

= = Background = =

In May 1798 , a French fleet under General Napoleon Bonaparte crossed the Mediterranean Sea , sailing for Egypt . Pausing at Malta on 9 June , Bonaparte landed soldiers and seized the island leaving a sizeable French garrison at Valletta under General Claude @-@ Henri Belgrand de Vaubois while the rest of the fleet continued on to Alexandria . After the successful landing in Egypt , Bonaparte marched inland at the head of his army . The fleet anchored in Aboukir Bay to support the troops ashore and was surprised and almost completely destroyed on 1 August by a British fleet under Rear @-@ Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson . Only two ships of the line and two frigates escaped the Battle of the Nile from the 17 French ships that participated in the action . Of the survivors , the ship of the line G n reux sailed for Corfu while Guillaume Tell , under Contre @-@ Admiral Pierre @-@ Charles Villeneuve , reached Malta with the two frigates .

When Villeneuve arrived at Malta in September 1798 , the island was already in turmoil : the dissolution of the Roman Catholic Church on the island under French rule had been highly unpopular with the Maltese population , who forced the French garrison to retreat into the fortress of Valletta on 2 September . By the start of October , British and Portuguese troops had supplemented the Maltese irregulars , while a naval squadron watched Valletta harbour , to prevent any French effort to resupply and reinforce the garrison . Although small quantities of material reached Valletta from France in early 1799 , by the start of 1800 no ship had arrived for more than seven months , and the garrison was near starvation . In an effort to resupply the garrison , the French sent a convoy from Toulon in February 1800 , but the ships were intercepted off Malta by a squadron under Nelson on 17 February and in the ensuing battle the flagship G n reux was captured and Contre @-@ Admiral Jean @-@ Baptiste Perr e was killed .

Without Perr e 's supplies , the garrison faced continued food shortages , and by March Vaubois and Villeneuve decided to send an urgent request for support to France . For this operation they chose the 80 @-@ gun Guillaume Tell under Captain Saulnier , partly because the condition and size of the ship enabled Vaubois to embark over 900 men aboard , many of whom were sick or wounded . Contre @-@ Admiral Denis Decr s had command of the ship and Vaubois and

Villeneuve confirmed the date of departure for 30 March . While the French prepared this expedition , the British maintained their blockade , although without their commander . Nelson , in defiance of specific orders from his commanding officer Lord Keith , had retired to Palermo on Sicily to be with Emma , Lady Hamilton , the wife of the British ambassador Sir William Hamilton with whom Nelson was conducting an adulterous affair . In his absence , command had passed to Captain Sir Thomas Troubridge on HMS Culloden and then to Captain Manley Dixon on HMS Lion .

= = Battle = =

At 23 : 00 on 30 March , with a strong wind from the south , Guillaume Tell sailed from Valletta , Decrés hoping to use the cover of darkness to escape the British blockade . Dixon had deployed his ships around the island , with Valletta watched by the frigate HMS Penelope under Captain Henry Blackwood . At 23 : 55 , Blackwood 's lookouts spotted Guillaume Tell and the captain gave chase , ordering the brig HMS Minorca under Commander George Miller to convey the message to Dixon , whose ships were just visible in the distance . Blackwood also attempted to signal his discovery to his commanding officer as Penelope gave chase .

Blackwood rapidly gained on the ship of the line and by 00 : 30 the frigate was within range , pulling up under the stern of Guillaume Tell and beginning a steady fire to which Decrés could only respond with his stern @-@ chasers , light cannon situated in the stern of the ship . Decrés recognised that if he stopped to engage Penelope then the rest of Berry 's squadron , visible on the horizon to the south , would soon overwhelm him . He therefore continued sailing to the northeast , hoping his heavy ship of the line could outrun the light and speedy frigate . However , Penelope was too fast , and Blackwood handled his ship with considerable skill , managing to pass Decrés ' stern repeatedly and pour several raking broadsides into the French ship .

Blackwood 's attack was so successful that by dawn on 31 March Guillaume Tell had lost its main and mizen topmasts and its main yard , considerably reducing the speed at which Decrés could travel . The French ship had also suffered heavy casualties in the exchange , but Penelope had lost only one man killed and three wounded , and was almost undamaged . British reinforcements were now arriving from the south : the 64 @-@ gun HMS Lion under Captain Dixon had received Minorca 's warning at 01 : 00 and immediately sailed in pursuit , sending the brig on to Captain Sir Edward Berry in HMS Foudroyant , who lay some distance to leeward . By 05 : 00 , Dixon was close enough to engage , passing between Penelope and Guillaume Tell and firing a triple @-@ shotted broadside into the port side of the French ship . Shooting ahead of the now sluggish Guillaume Tell , Lion crossed its opponent 's bows and shot away the jib boom , allowing Dixon to maintain a position across the bow , raking the French ship from one end while Penelope did the same to the other . During these manoeuvres , Dixon 's ship had briefly become entangled with Guillaume Tell 's rigging , and two determined efforts to board the British ship had been driven off as the ships were disentangled .

For half an hour , Lion continued to fire into the larger Guillaume Tell , but Dixon was unable to keep his ship completely out of range of the French broadsides and by 05 : 30 the subsequent damage showed an effect , Lion dropping back and falling behind the French vessel , although remaining within range alongside Penelope . At 06 : 00 , Guillaume Tell came under attack for the third time , when Berry himself caught up with the battling ships in Foudroyant and pulled along the starboard broadside of the French ship of the line . Berry hailed Decrés to demand his surrender , and accompanied the demand with a triple @-@ shotted broadside , to which Decrés responded with fire from his own guns . Foudroyant was flying a full set of sails and therefore suffered severe damage to its rigging in the opening exchange , the additional speed provided by this rig forcing Foudroyant to move ahead of the French vessel . After working back alongside Guillaume Tell , Berry recommenced fire that rapidly tore away much of the remaining French rigging , allowing Lion and Penelope to return to the battle while Foudroyant dropped back to make urgent repairs .

By 06 : 30 the badly outnumbered French ship had lost both its main and mizen masts , Foudroyant returning to the battle in time to collapse the foremast by 08 : 00 . At 08 : 20 , with no means of making sail and with wreckage obscuring most of his gun decks , Decrés surrendered to spare any

further , fruitless , loss of life . His ship was in danger : the lack of masts and strong winds caused it to roll so severely that the lower deck gun ports had to be closed to prevent the ship from foundering . Casualties on the French ship numbered more than 200 , from a crew of over 900 , with both Decrés and Saulnier badly wounded . British losses were lighter , with eight killed and 64 wounded , including Berry , in Foudroyant , eight killed and 38 wounded in Lion and one killed and three wounded ( one fatally ) in Penelope . Damage was unevenly spread , Foudroyant suffering most severely , with the hull and all masts damaged , the mizzenmast so badly that it collapsed at approximately 12 : 00 , wounding five more men . Lion was badly hit , although not so severely as Foudroyant while Penelope was only lightly damaged in the masts and rigging . The battle , which had begun within sight of Malta , had concluded roughly 21 nautical miles ( 39 km ) south @-@ west of Cape Passaro on Sicily .

= = Aftermath = =

Both Foudroyant and Lion were too battered to provide an effective tow to the dismasted French ship , and as a result Penelope was left to bring the shattered Guillaume Tell into Syracuse on Sicily . Eventually the ship was repaired sufficiently for the journey to Britain , and there was added to the Royal Navy under the name HMS Malta . Malta was , with HMS Tonnant captured two years earlier at the Nile , the most powerful third rate in the British fleet , and served for many years , participating at the Battle of Cape Finisterre in 1805 .

The British officers were praised for the capture of Guillaume Tell , the last surviving French ship of the line to escape the Battle of the Nile : Nelson , who by his absence had " missed what would indeed have been the crowning glory to his Mediterranean career " , wrote to Berry that " Your conduct and character in the late glorious occasion stamps your fame beyond the reach of envy . " Despite Nelson 's praise however , Berry in particular came in for subsequent criticism , especially from the historian William James , who wrote in his 1827 history of the conflict that :

" Had the Foudroyant , single @-@ handed , met the Guillaume @-@ Tell , the combat would have been between two of the most powerful ships that had ever so met ; and , although the Foudroyant 's slight inferiority of force , being chiefly in number of men , was not that of which a British captain would complain , still the chances were equal , that the Guillaume @-@ Tell , so gallantly manned , and so ably commanded , came off the conqueror . "

James instead attributed most of the praise for the victory to Blackwood and Dixon , whose ships were heavily outmatched by Guillaume Tell , but who successfully pressed their attacks with the intention of delaying the French retreat . He also highly praised Decrés for his conduct in the engagement , stating that " A more heroic defence than that of the Guillaume @-@ Tell is not to be found among the records of naval actions " . First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte reached a similar conclusion , and when Decrés was exchanged soon after the battle he was presented with *armes d 'honneur* , later converted to membership of the *Légion d 'honneur* . He was also given the position of maritime prefect of the Biscay port of Lorient .

Aboard Guillaume Tell , the British found evidence of the severity of the food shortages in Valletta : " the only thing found in La Guillaume Tell was the leg of a mule , hung for safety and his especial use of the admiral 's stern @-@ galley " . News of the capture of Guillaume Tell was immediately passed to Vaubois by the British besiegers , along with a demand that he surrender the island . The French general , despite dwindling food supplies , refused , stating " Cette place est en trop bon état , et je suis moi @-@ même trop jaloux de bien servir mon pays et de conserver mon honneur , pour écouter vos propositions . " ( " This place is in too good a situation , and I am too conscious of the service of my country and my honour , to listen to your proposals " ) . Despite Vaubois ' defiance , the garrison was rapidly starving , and although the French commander resisted until 4 September , he was eventually forced to surrender Valletta and all of its military equipment to the British .