

= Action of 16 October 1799 =

The Action of 16 October 1799 was a minor naval engagement during the French Revolutionary Wars between a squadron of British Royal Navy frigates and two frigates of the Spanish Navy close to the Spanish naval port of Vigo in Galicia . The Spanish ships were a treasure convoy , carrying silver specie and luxury trade goods across the Atlantic Ocean from the colonies of New Spain to Spain . Sighted by British frigate HMS Naiad enforcing the blockade of Vigo late on the 15 October , the Spanish ships were in the last stages of their journey . Turning to flee from Naiad , the Spanish soon found themselves surrounded as more British frigates closed in .

Although they separated their ships in an effort to split their opponents , the Spanish captains were unable to escape : Thetis was captured after a short engagement with HMS Ethalion on the morning of 16 October , while Santa Brigada almost reached safety , only being caught on the morning of 17 October in the approaches to the safe harbour at Muros . After a short engagement amid the rocks she was also captured by an overwhelming British force . Both captured ships were taken to Britain , where their combined cargoes were transported with great fanfare to the Bank of England . The eventual value of their cargo was assessed as at least £ 618 @, @ 040 , resulting in one of the largest hauls of prize money ever awarded .

= = Background = =

In 1796 , following the secret terms of the Treaty of San Ildefonso , the Kingdom of Spain suddenly reversed its position in the French Revolutionary Wars turning from an enemy of the French Republic into an ally . The Spanish declaration of war on Great Britain forced the British Mediterranean Fleet to abandon the Mediterranean Sea entirely , retreating to ports at Gibraltar and Lisbon . This force now concentrated against the Spanish Navy , most of which was stationed at the main fleet base of Cádiz in Southern Spain . A British blockade fleet won a significant victory over the Spanish at the Battle of Cape St Vincent in February 1797 , dissuading the Spanish fleet from playing a significant role in the ongoing war .

Other Spanish ports were also blockaded with the intention of limiting Spanish trade and movement and intercepting treasure convoys from the colonies of New Spain and South America . Vast quantities of gold , silver and valuable trade goods crossed the Atlantic in regular armed frigate convoys . To intercept and seize these shipments the Royal Navy dispatched their own frigates to patrol the Spanish coast . To encourage their sailors , the Royal Navy distributed prize money to the value of the ships and material captured and the seizure of a Spanish treasure fleet could yield spectacular amounts of money : particularly large sums had been captured during previous wars in 1656 , 1744 and 1762 , but during the first three years of conflict between Great Britain and Spain only one treasure convoy had been intercepted , near Cádiz at the Action of 26 April 1797 , and on that occasion the treasure was smuggled ashore before the convoy was seized .

= = Pursuit = =

On 21 August 1799 , a convoy of two 34 @-@ gun frigates , Thetis under Captain Don Juan de Mendoza and Santa Brigada under Captain Don Antonio Pillon , sailed from Vera Cruz in New Spain with a cargo that included cochineal , indigo dye , cocoa and sugar but which principally consisted of more than two million silver Spanish dollars . The passage across the Atlantic was uneventful and by the afternoon of 15 October the convoy , under orders to make any Spanish port , was nearing its destination at Vigo , a fortified port city in Galicia just south of Cape Finisterre at the most northwestern point of Spain . The ports of Northern Spain were blockaded by British frigates sailing independently , crossing the approaches in search of enemy shipping and it was one such ship , the 38 @-@ gun HMS Naiad under Captain William Pierrepont , that sighted the Spanish convoy in position 41 ° 01 ' N 12 ° 35 ' W at 20 : 00 on 15 October . Turning away to the southeast , the Spanish ships then made all sail northeast in search of a safe harbour , with Pierrepont in pursuit .

At 03 : 30 on 16 October , another sail was spotted to the southwest , rapidly revealed to be a

second British frigate , the 38 @-@ gun HMS Ethalion under Captain James Young . Ethalion joined the chase and at dawn two more sails were sighted , the 32 @-@ gun HMS Alcmene under Captain Henry Digby to the west and 32 @-@ gun HMS Triton under Captain John Gore to the north . With four British frigates now in full pursuit , the Spanish captains sought to split their enemy and divided , at which Pierrepont directed Ethalion , the closest British ship , to pursue the faster Thetis . Young complied , firing long @-@ range shot in Santa Brigada 's direction at 09 : 00 , driving Pillon 's ship further from his companion .

= = Battle = =

As Naiad , Triton and Alcmene streamed past in pursuit of Santa Brigada , Young focused his attention on Thetis , coming within range at 11 : 30 . Mendoza , seeing that battle was inevitable , bore up across Ethalion 's bows in an effort to rake Young 's ship . Young turned in order to thwart the manoeuvre and fired two rapid broadsides into Thetis , which responded in kind . For an hour the frigates exchanged running fire until Mendoza , realising escape was impossible , surrendered . Thetis had lost one man killed and nine wounded in the exchange while Ethalion had suffered no casualties .

As Ethalion subdued Thetis the remainder of the British squadron continued southwards in pursuit of Santa Brigada . Pillon was an experienced officer with a good knowledge of the Northern Spanish coast and he intended to lose his pursuers in the rocky channels of Cape Finisterre . Early on 17 October he reached Spanish coastal waters , rounding Finisterre just beyond the Monte Lora rocks . Captain Gore on Triton , which was in full flow at seven knots , was unaware of the obstacle and at 05 : 00 crashed into them , coming to a juddering halt and inflicting severe damage to his ship 's hull . Gore was able however to bring Triton off soon afterwards and continued pursuit , assisted by Digby on Alcmene who was able to block Pillon 's route into Porte de Vidre . Both frigates opened fire on Santa Brigada at 07 : 00 as the Spanish ship sought shelter in the rocks at Commarurto close to the safe harbour at Muros , Pillon 's movement hampered by the coastal rias that blocked the wind . After an hour of resistance , with Naiad belatedly approaching , Pillon was forced to surrender his ship to superior British forces . Santa Brigada had lost two men killed and eight wounded , Alcmene one killed and nine wounded and Triton a single man wounded .

= = Aftermath = =

As the British force took control of Santa Brigada , a Spanish squadron of four ships sailed from Vigo with the appearance of intending to bring Pierrepont 's squadron to battle . Pierrepont immediately issued orders for his ships to meet with the Spanish who promptly turned about and returned to port without coming within range . A shore breeze enabled the British ships and their prize to extricate themselves from the Commarurto rocks without further damage . They then sailed directly for the fleet base at Plymouth , arriving on 22 October to find that Thetis and Ethalion had reached the port the day before . Dispatches were sent to Lord Bridport , commander of the Channel Fleet , which were then forwarded to the Admiralty and revealed the scale of the prize .

Aboard Thetis was found a quantity of trade cocoa and a series of boxes containing coin , including 333 boxes of 3 @,@ 000 dollars each , four boxes of 2 @,@ 385 dollars each , 94 boxes containing 4 @,@ 000 dollars each and two golden doubloons and 90 golden half @-@ doubloons . This totalled 1 @,@ 385 @,@ 292 silver dollars , with a sterling value of £ 311 @,@ 690 . On Santa Brigada were trade cocoa , sugar , indigo and cochineal worth in total about £ 5 @,@ 000 as well as 446 boxes containing 3 @,@ 000 dollars each , 59 bags and three kegs of dollars and numerous loose coins , for a total value of at least 1 @,@ 338 @,@ 000 silver dollars or £ 301 @,@ 350 . Altogether the sterling value of the cargo was calculated as not less than £ 618 @,@ 040 ( the equivalent of £ 54 @,@ 762 @,@ 000 in 2016 ) . The captured ships however were written off as worthless , although some additional money was made auctioning off their naval stores . In the aftermath , the sailors of the squadron were noted in the streets of Portsmouth wearing " bank notes stuck in their hats , buying watches for the fun of frying them , and issuing laws that any of their crew

who appeared without a gold @-@ laced hat should be clobbered , so that the unlucky man who appeared in silver could only escape by representing that the costlier articles were all bought up , but he had compelled the shopkeeper to take money for gold lace . "

This vast sum of money was transported through Plymouth on 63 wagons , guarded by armed sailors and Royal Marines and accompanied by musical bands and cheering crowds to the security of the Royal Citadel . It remained in Plymouth until November when it was removed to London with considerable ceremony and placed at the Bank of England . The sums awarded as prize money , distributed in equal proscribed shares among the crews of Ethalion , Naiad , Alcmene and Triton were among the largest ever recorded . Each captain was given £ 40 @,@ 730 ( of which a third was due to the admiral in command ) , each lieutenant £ 5 @,@ 091 , each warrant officer £ 2 @,@ 468 , each midshipman £ 791 and each sailor or marine £ 182 . For the regular seamen , this total was 15 times their annual pay of £ 12 . As historian James Henderson noted " even the humblest seaman could set himself up with a cosy pub " . For the captains , normally paid £ 150 a year , this was more money than they could make in 270 years . On the only subsequent occasion when a Spanish treasure fleet was successfully intercepted , at the Battle of Cape Santa Maria in October 1804 , an even greater haul was captured . On that occasion however the Admiralty used an obscure regulation to seize the bulk of the prize and the captains only received around £ 15 @,@ 000 each .

Historian Richard Woodman has noted that this action illustrates both the dominance of the Royal Navy and its high standards at this stage in the war , stating that " The coincidental appearance of four frigates in the vast Atlantic testifies to the enormous resources the British put into the prosecution of the war . That the four frigate captains proceeded to act in such perfect concert is further evidence , if it were needed , of the shared standards of mutual help and assistance " .