

= Action of 30 June 1798 =

The Action of 30 June 1798 was a minor naval engagement fought along the Biscay coast of France during the French Revolutionary Wars . The French Navy had been largely driven from the Atlantic Ocean early in the war following heavy losses in a series of failed operations . This had allowed the Royal Navy 's Channel Fleet to institute a close blockade on the French naval ports of the Biscay coast , particularly Brest in Brittany . The blockade strategy included a constantly patrolling inshore squadron composed of frigates , tasked with preventing the passage of French ships into or out of the port . In the spring of 1798 , several French frigates stationed in the Indian Ocean were sent back to France as the base at Île de France could no longer supply them effectively . One of these ships was the 40 @-@ gun frigate Seine , which departed Port Louis laden with 280 soldiers from the garrison .

Seine had a rapid passage back to European waters , arriving in the Bay of Biscay on 28 June . Early the following morning , with the Brittany coast in sight , Seine was spotted by the inshore frigate squadron of HMS Jason , HMS Pique and HMS Mermaid . While Mermaid cut Seine off from the coast , Jason and Pique gave chase as Seine fled southwards . Pique reached Seine at 23 : 00 that evening and for more than two and a half hours the frigates pounded at one another until Pique fell back . Pique and Jason continued the chase full speed through the night , until suddenly all three frigates crashed headlong into the sandbanks off La Tranche @-@ sur @-@ Mer on the Vendée coast . Even while grounded the frigates continued to fire on one another until Mermaid finally arrived and the outnumbered Seine surrendered . Jason and Seine were badly damaged but successfully refloated , the casualties on the packed decks of the French ship appallingly high , but Pique was an irretrievable wreck : the ship was evacuated and then burnt before the remainder of the squadron returned to Britain with their prize .

= = Background = =

In the early years of the French Revolutionary Wars , although the French Navy had sought to oppose the Royal Navy at sea from their main base at Brest in Brittany , the Royal Navy had achieved victories at the Glorious First of June and Battle of Groix . The losses inflicted on the French Atlantic fleet in these battles were compounded by large numbers of ships wrecked in storms during the disastrous Croisière du Grand Hiver and Expédition d 'Irlande operations . By 1798 the Royal Navy was unopposed in its control of the Atlantic , enforcing its supremacy by a strategy of close blockade , maintaining a battle fleet at sea off Brittany and an inshore squadron of frigates watching the approaches to Brest . In June 1798 the inshore squadron included a detachment comprising the 38 @-@ gun HMS Jason under Captain Charles Stirling , the 36 @-@ gun HMS Pique under Captain David Milne and 32 @-@ gun HMS Mermaid under Captain James Newman @-@ Newman .

For French warships oceanic travel was extremely hazardous and ships often travelled in numbers . In the spring of 1796 a squadron commanded by Contre @-@ amiral Pierre César Charles de Sercey had sailed from Rochefort to reinforce French naval forces in the Indian Ocean , based at Port Louis on the Île de France . Sercey 's squadron failed to make a significant impression , driven off from the East Indies in an inconclusive action off Sumatra , and then tricked into fleeing from a vulnerable East India Company merchant convoy in the Bali Strait Incident in January 1797 . By the end of the year the Colonial Assembly , which were unhappy with plans of the French Directory to abolish slavery , refused to continue supplying the squadron and garrison , forcing Sercey to disperse his ships . First Régénérée and Vertu were ordered back to France , and then in early 1798 the 40 @-@ gun Seine was instructed to follow them , carrying 280 soldiers from the garrison no longer supported by the Colonial Assembly . Seine , still commanded by Lieutenant Julien @-@ Gabriel Bigot following the death of Captain Latour off Sumatra in 1796 , sailed on 24 March , overcrowded with the stores and dependents accompanying the soldiers .

= = Battle = =

Despite the overloading , Seine made a rapid journey to European waters , arriving in the Bay of Biscay just three months later on 28 June . Sailing for Brest with the wind , the Penmarck rocks were visible from Seine at 07 : 00 on 29 June when three sails appeared to the northeast . This was the inshore squadron under Stirling , and Jason and Pique immediately gave chase while Mermaid diverted northwards , cutting Seine off from the Breton coast and the harbour of Lorient and forcing Bigot to turn away , fleeing southwards towards La Rochelle and the Vendée coast instead . Jason and Pique followed under all sail while Mermaid was left far behind .

Throughout the day the chase continued , the British frigates gaining slowly on their quarry and as darkness fell Pique closed with the larger French ship . At 23 : 00 Milne was close enough to open fire on Seine , to which Bigot responded without reducing speed . For the next two and a half hours the frigates exchanged broadsides at full speed as the French coastline rapidly approached ahead . At 01 : 35 a shot from Seine struck the main topmast on Pique , bringing it crashing down . The consequent loss of speed forced Milne back , Seine pulling away from the smaller ship but unable to escape Jason which was steadily gaining .

Stirling was concerned by the proximity of the coast and hailed Pique with orders to anchor before it grounded , but Milne did not hear the order correctly and instead increased sail , lurching ahead of Jason and straight onto a sandbank close to La Tranche @-@ sur @-@ Mer on the Vendée coast . Seine too had struck the shore a little distance ahead , and Stirling was unable to arrest Jason 's momentum before his ship too became stuck , lying between Pique and Seine . The French ship had been badly damaged in the crash , all three masts collapsing overboard at impact , but actually lay in a stronger position : Jason blocked Pique 's arc of fire and Stirling 's ship had swung with the rising tide , leaving its stern exposed . Bigot took advantage of this position to fire several raking broadsides into Jason , during which Stirling was wounded and command passed to Lieutenant Charles Inglis . Inglis responded to the fire by cutting stern gunports to fire chase guns at Seine , and Milne succeeded in dragging his frigate around through the novel expedient of ordering his men to run towards the bows carrying round shot . This sudden shift in weight gently rotated the grounded ship to face Seine and Milne could direct four of his 12 @-@ pounder long guns at the French ship . Under fire and with Mermaid finally approaching , Bigot determined that further resistance was hopeless and struck his colours .

= = = Combatant summary = = =

In this table , " Guns " refers to all cannon carried by the ship , including the maindeck guns that were taken into consideration when calculating its rate , as well as any carronades carried aboard . " Broadside weight " records the combined weight of shot that could be fired in a single simultaneous discharge of an entire broadside .

= = Aftermath = =

Dawn on 30 June revealed the three frigates grounded on the sandbar , prompting a response from the French forces in nearby La Rochelle . Two frigates , a brig and a squadron of gunboats were sent to fire on the British ships , but this force was dissuaded from engaging by the arrival of another British blockade squadron comprising HMS Phaeton under Captain Robert Stopford , HMS San Fiorenzo under Captain Sir Harry Neale and HMS Triton under Captain John Gore . Stopford 's squadron assisted Stirling 's force as Jason was towed off by Mermaid . Pique however was irretrievably stuck with water leaking into the hull . After all efforts to refloat the ship had been exhausted , the frigate was evacuated and stripped of stores before the wreck was set on fire . It took some time for boarding parties to reach Seine and a number of the French crew had taken the delay in seizure of the ship to dive overboard and swim for the beach , making an accounting of casualties difficult . As the day continued , boat parties of French civilians sailed out to the ship and climbed aboard , breaking into the liquor stores leading to drunken confusion on deck . Bigot was allowed to go ashore temporarily , as were four men escorting a lady from Île de France : all five

French sailors subsequently returned to captivity voluntarily . Seine was subsequently refloated with jury masts after the guns were thrown overboard to lighten the ship , and the figurehead of Pique was nailed over her own , Seine sailing with the squadron to Portsmouth .

Losses on the British ships had been light , with seven killed on Jason , including the second lieutenant , and eleven wounded , including Stirling . Pique lost one killed and another lost overboard and six wounded . French losses were enormous , the effects of concentrated cannon fire on the packed decks producing casualties of approximately 170 killed and 100 wounded , the former including a number who drowned after the ship grounded . Bigot and his crew were brought to Britain as prisoners of war , the commander later exchanged and twice promoted on his return to France in recognition of his resistance during the engagement , although unsubstantiated rumours persisted that he had personally shot some of his men when they abandoned their guns . Milne was complimented for his tenacious pursuit of Seine and after repairs he and his crew were confirmed in possession of the French ship , which served in the Royal Navy under the same name . By the time the prize was commissioned many of its captors were prisoners of war . On 13 October 1798 Jason was patrolling off Brest when a number of French luggers were sighted . Stirling gave chase but Jason ran headlong into a submerged rock near the Pointe du Raz and began to founder . Stirling had no choice but to bring the frigate inshore and land on the French coast as the frigate sank . Stirling and his men were captured , except for twelve sailors who , in groups of six , stole a cutter and a jollyboat and escaped to Plymouth .