

= Action of 15 July 1798 =

The Action of 15 July 1798 was a minor naval battle of the French Revolutionary Wars , fought off the Spanish Mediterranean coast by the Royal Navy ship of the line HMS Lion under Captain Manley Dixon and a squadron of four Spanish Navy frigates under Commodore Don Felix O 'Neil . Lion was one of several ships sent into the Western Mediterranean by Vice @-@ Admiral Earl St Vincent , commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet based at the Tagus in Portugal during the late spring of 1798 . The Spanish squadron was a raiding force that had sailed from Cartagena in Murcia seven days earlier , and was intercepted while returning to its base after an unsuccessful cruise . Although together the Spanish vessels outweighed the British ship , individually they were weaker and Commodore O 'Neil failed to ensure that his manoeuvres were co @-@ ordinated . As a result , one of the frigates , Santa Dorotea , fell out of the line of battle and was attacked by Lion .

Despite ineffectual long @-@ range gunfire towards the British ship by the remainder of the Spanish squadron , the isolated Santa Dorotea was rapidly forced to surrender , O 'Neil eventually turning the other three frigates back towards Cartagena . Unopposed , Dixon was able to consolidate his prize and send it to St Vincent 's fleet off Cadiz , where it was subsequently purchased into the Royal Navy . Lion remained in the Mediterranean during the year , later participating in the blockades of Malta and Alexandria . The Spanish , their seaports carefully guarded by Royal Navy squadrons , launched no further expeditions into the Mediterranean during the year .

= = Background = =

At the start of 1798 , the Mediterranean Sea was entirely under the control of the French Navy and their allies , including Spain , which had switched sides in the French Revolutionary Wars in late 1796 at the Treaty of San Ildefonso . Denied access to deep water ports and adequate supplies , the Royal Navy fleet deployed in the Mediterranean under Vice @-@ Admiral Sir John Jervis was forced to withdraw to the nearest friendly fleet anchorage , at the mouth of the Tagus River in Portugal . Although forced to retreat , Jervis ' force was not defeated and on 14 February 1797 he achieved a victory over the Spanish Navy at the Battle of Cape St Vincent , capturing four Spanish ships of the line . A blockade of the Spanish Atlantic ports was instituted , especially Cadiz , the large southern fleet anchorage , and the Spanish did not again attempt to break out during the remainder of the year .

Early in 1798 , rumours reached Jervis , recently ennobled as Earl St Vincent , of a buildup of French forces around the Mediterranean seaport of Toulon under General Napoleon Bonaparte . Similar rumours had reached the Admiralty in London , and St Vincent therefore sent Rear @-@ Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson and three ships of the line to observe French activity . Nelson arrived too late however , and the French fleet had already sailed , carrying over 30 @,@ 000 men into the Eastern Mediterranean . Nelson , joined by a fleet of ten ships sent by St Vincent under Captain Thomas Troubridge , pursued the French , but failed to learn of their destination before the French fleet captured Malta . Ten days later , Bonaparte sailed for Alexandria for the second stage of his operation and Nelson 's fleet unwittingly passed his during the night , the British beating the French to Egypt but sailing off again before Bonaparte arrived .

While Nelson was crossing the Mediterranean , St Vincent was taking advantage of the absence of enemy forces in the Western Mediterranean to deploy newly arrived warships to the region . One of these vessels was the 64 @-@ gun ship of the line HMS Lion , under the command of Captain Manley Dixon , who had been sent to St Vincent 's fleet early in the year as a replacement for one of Troubridge 's ships . Initially ordered to patrol the Spanish Mediterranean coast , Lion was cruising 97 miles (156 km) southeast of Cartagena , a port in the Spanish Region of Murcia at 09 : 00 on 15 July when four sails were spotted to the southeast .

= = Battle = =

The four sails spotted by Lion 's lookout were a squadron of Spanish frigates that had departed Cartagena on 8 July for a brief and unsuccessful commerce raiding operation in the Western Mediterranean . Each ship carried 34 @-@ guns and a weight of shot of approximately 180 pounds (82 kg) to Lion 's 678 pounds (308 kg) . On sighting Lion , the Spanish ships formed a battle line , with Commodore Felix O 'Neil 's flagship Pomona under Captain Don Francis Villamil in the lead followed by Proserpine under Captain Don Quaj . Bial , Santa Dorotea under Captain Don Manuel Gerraro and Santa Cazilda under Captain Don Deam . Errara . Seeking to engage the strangers , Dixon bore up , halting his movement to ensure he held the weather gage . This would enable him to manoeuvre with the wind and attack the Spanish at the time of his choosing . Seizing the advantage , Dixon then bore down on the frigate squadron , which prepared to meet the attack .

One of the frigates , Santa Dorotea , had lost a topmast sometime earlier and as result was slower than the rest of the squadron . Falling behind the others , Gerraro soon found that his ship was in danger of being isolated by Lion , as Dixon steered for the rapidly opening gap between the Spanish ships . Recognising the danger , O 'Neil ordered the front three frigates to turn around and sail to the defence of Santa Dorotea , passing close by Lion and opening a heavy fire at 11 : 15 . Lion replied , and the Spanish frigates did not immediately turn back for a second pass , continuing ahead as Dixon closed with the stragglng Santa Dorotea . In an effort to deter the ship of the line , Gerraro opened fire on Lion with his stern chasers , cannon situated in the frigate 's stern , which caused considerable damage to Dixon 's rigging . As Lion began to close the distance , O 'Neil 's ships returned , but the frigates passed Lion at extreme distance , their broadsides having no effect and again coming under fire themselves .

Eventually , Dixon succeeded in bringing his ship alongside the Spanish frigate and opened a heavy fire , to which Gerraro replied with his own broadside . The larger and more powerful British ship was able to rapidly inflict severe damage to the Santa Dorotea , and within minutes the mizenmast had fallen and the mainmast and rudder were severely battered . As Santa Dorotea veered off course , O 'Neil passed Lion for a third time , at an even greater distance than before , and once again his broadsides failed to have an effect and again he came under fire from the British vessel . His last attempt to save Santa Dorotea defeated , O 'Neil turned away and his ships raised all sail in the direction of Cartagena at 13 : 10 . Gerraro , his isolated ship trapped by Lion , which was slowly turning back towards the drifting frigate , raised the Union Flag upside down as a sign of surrender .

= = Aftermath = =

Santa Dorotea had suffered severe damage during the brief engagement , and had at least 20 men killed and 32 wounded from a crew of 371 . By contrast , Lion had lost just two men wounded in the exchange : a seaman lost a leg and a midshipman was shot in the shoulder . Although Lion 's rigging had been badly torn , there was no structural damage at all . Securing his prize , Dixon spent the next day conducting extensive repairs before sending Santa Dorotea to Earl St Vincent off Cadiz . The captured ship was purchased into the Royal Navy and served for several years as HMS Santa Dorotea , rated at 36 @-@ guns . The prize money generated by the sale of the captured ship and the stores aboard was paid out to the Dixon 's crew in October 1800 . Nearly five decades later the Admiralty recognised the action with the clasp " LION 15 JULY 1798 " attached to the Naval General Service Medal , awarded upon application to all British participants still living in 1847 .

Lion remained in the Western Mediterranean for the next two months , eventually joining with a squadron of four Portuguese ships of the line under the command of Tomás Xavier Teles de Castro da Gama , Marquess de Niza . In September , Niza 's squadron was ordered to join Nelson in his search for the French and sailed eastwards , but while passing to the north of Malta they encountered a large convoy of battered vessels under Captain Sir James Saumarez . These ships were seven British ships of the line and six captured French ships , all survivors of the Battle of the Nile , Nelson 's successful conclusion of the campaign fought at Aboukir Bay off Egypt on 1 August . The Anglo @-@ Portuguese squadron continued to Alexandria in October , briefly joining the blockade squadron there under Captain Sir Samuel Hood before returning to Malta in December as

part of a new squadron formed off the island . Lion followed the Portuguese back to Malta in December . The Spanish did not launch another expedition from their Mediterranean ports during 1798 .

= = Notable participants = =

José de San Martín was a staff member on the Santa Dorothea .