

## **The Battle Off the Virginia Capes**

On September 5, 1781, a French fleet of twenty-four ships of the line engaged a British fleet of nineteen ships of the line in the Battle off the Virginia Capes. The French fleet prevented the British fleet from relieving the besieged army of Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis, 2d Earl Cornwallis, at Yorktown, Virginia, leading to the eventual surrender of some 7,000 British troops to the combined American and French arms.

The French fleet of twenty-eight ships of the line, under command of Admiral François Joseph Paul comte de Grasse-Tilly, entered the Chesapeake Bay on August 30, 1781. By the second of September, ships of the fleet had moved up the James River to land the 3,300 French soldiers brought from the West Indies to assist in the allied siege of the British army at Yorktown. Mid-morning September fifth, a French frigate on scouting duty brought word that a fleet of at least ten sail had appeared on the horizon. De Grasse thought this must be the French fleet from Newport, Rhode Island, under Admiral Barras, bringing the army's siege artillery. But by eleven o'clock the number of sail in the strange fleet had risen into the twenties and the French admiral knew it could only be the British. Realizing the need to meet the British fleet before it intercepted Barras, de Grasse did not wait to re-embark the 1,800 sailors who were ashore to replenish the fleet's supply of water and fresh produce or to recall several of his ships blockading the York and James Rivers. At 11:30, twenty-four French ships of the line cut their anchor cables and stood out to sea to fight the engagement on whose outcome rested the independence of the United States of America.

On May 6, 1781, a French frigate arrived in Boston delivering Admiral Louis Jacques comte de Barras de Saint-Laurant, who brought the following information:

- Barras was to take command of the French squadron at Newport.
- De Grasse was to send part of his West Indies squadron north in July or August
- And General Jean-Baptiste Donatien Vimeur comte de Rochambeau was to incorporate his corps of French troops with George Washington's Continental troops

De Grasse had the choice of cooperating with a campaign against New York-- Washington and Rochambeau planned to probe the British defenses of New York City-- or with a campaign against the British army that was invading Virginia. De Grasse chose the latter.

Lord Cornwallis entered Virginia from North Carolina in the spring of 1781, and uniting his force with a British detachment that had been raiding in the Chesapeake and chasing the Continental Army troops under Lafayette and local militia all around the commonwealth of Virginia, commanded something more than 7,000 troops. At the end of July, under orders from General Sir Henry Clinton to establish himself somewhere in the Chesapeake he could hold as a base for naval operations and where he could be supplied by sea, Cornwallis occupied Yorktown, Virginia.

The French had agreed to cooperate with the Spanish in a campaign in the Caribbean. Concluding that the coming of the hurricane season would make a campaign against Jamaica untenable for the 1781 season, Francisco Saavedra, sent by the Spanish king to coordinate Spain's military and naval operations in America, released for a time a French corps of 3,300 men at Saint Domingue that had been placed in Spanish service.

Since his arrival in Saint Domingue the previous year, the French general Claude-Anne Marquis de Saint-Simon, eager for more military action than he expected to have with the Spanish, had been offering to come to North America and place himself under Rochambeau's orders. When de Grasse announced his intention to sail with twenty-four of his ships of the line for an expedition to the Chesapeake, Savaadra urged him to sail instead with his entire force and to enable him to do so offered to send four Spanish ships of the line to protect the French merchant fleet at Cape Français. Promising to return to the Caribbean when the hurricane season ended in mid-October, de Grasse sailed on August 5. Before sailing, de Grasse stowed away aboard his fleet a war chest of more than a million livres, raised by private subscription in Havana, Cuba. De Grasse departed the Caribbean with the three essentials requested by Washington and Rochambeau: a superior fleet, reinforcements of land troops, and money to keep the Continental Army in the field. De Grasse's fleet arrived at the Chesapeake on August 30, and the next day landed the troops.

On August 14, Washington learned of de Grasse's decision to come to the Chesapeake. He ordered Rochambeau's corps of about 2,000 men and 2,500 American troops to Virginia, where it was to join Continental troops under Lafayette in besieging Cornwallis's army in fortifications on the peninsula between the York and James Rivers.

De Grasse sailed from the West Indies with twenty-eight ships of the line, practically his entire force. Never dreaming that de Grasse would be so bold, the British admiral Sir George Rodney sailed home to England unwell and ordered his subordinate Samuel Hood to North America. Rodney assumed that Hood's fleet of fourteen ships of the line would be sufficient to maintain naval superiority in the north. On his way north

Hood looked into the Chesapeake on August 25 and, finding no fleet there, continued on to New York, where he placed himself under the orders of Thomas Graves, commander of the North American station, on August 28.

Through most of the summer of 1781, even into late August, Sir Henry Clinton, in New York, had no inkling that Cornwallis's army might be in danger. Clinton was more concerned about the safety of his own command and in July, in fact, had issued orders to Cornwallis to send reinforcements to New York, orders he revoked only after receiving instructions from London. In addition after the French army left Rhode Island and joined Washington's army outside New York, the British saw an opening for capturing Newport and Barras's squadron with it. Clinton was convinced that Washington and Rochambeau would not move south without naval superiority.

On the evening of August 28, the same day Hood's squadron arrived at New York, the British learned that Barras's squadron of six ships of the line had sailed to the southward. It was not until the 31st, however, that Graves was able to cross the bar with five ships to join Hood, where he waited with his squadron, and sail in hopes of intercepting Barras.

Graves commanded only nineteen ships of the line when he approached the Chesapeake on September 5 and to his surprise discovered the entrance to the capes occupied by the superior French West Indian fleet rather than by Barras's smaller squadron.

When de Grasse arrived in the Chesapeake, he found Cornwallis supported by three Royal Navy frigates and six armed sloops in the York River. The French admiral

stationed vessels at the mouth of the York to blockade the British warships and in the James River to prevent Cornwallis from escaping to North Carolina.

The morning of September 5th found twenty-four of de Grasse's twenty-eight ships of the line drawn up in three files in Lynnhaven bay, with about eighteen hundred sailors ashore landing the Marquis de Saint-Simon's troops and watering the fleet.

Unable to recall the absent sailors in time, and leaving behind four ships of the line that were occupied in the rivers in support of the army, de Grasse sailed out with twenty-four to meet Graves.

De Grasse chose not to form a defensive line within the Capes because

- Graves could have entered the Chesapeake without defeating de Grasse first, which could have given Washington's army trouble, even if Graves would have been trapped; and
- de Grasse needed to insure that Barras's squadron with the army's siege artillery got safely into the Chesapeake

De Grasse had to fight Graves in order to allow Barras to slip into the Chesapeake; he did not have to defeat Graves.

Graves was unaware of Cornwallis's extreme danger; he may have been aware that Washington and Rochambeau were marching to Virginia, but he would not have known that Cornwallis's army was immobilized.

The French fleet straggled out of the capes in some disorder, the van, under Louis-Antoine comte de Bougainville, getting significantly ahead of the center. Graves did not take advantage of the stretching out of de Grasse's line of battle to attack a portion of it. His actions indicate that he was intent on preventing ships of the more

numerous French fleet from doubling his, catching British ships between two fires.

Graves sought to fight a conventional battle of line against line.

The British fleet approached the Chesapeake Capes on an east to west line, the wind from north-northeast on the starboard quarter. Hood commanded the van, Graves the center, and Rear Admiral Francis Samuel Drake the rear. Shortly after 2 P.M. when the fleet came in danger of running onto the Middle Ground, a shoal in the mouth of the bay, Graves ordered all ships to wear together. This put the fleet on a west to east line, roughly parallel to that of the French at a distance of four or five miles. The maneuver reversed the order of battle, making Drake's squadron the van and hood's the rear. It also maintained the British windward position, which gave them the choice of when to engage, since the French could not sail into the wind to force battle. In order to insure that his line of battle extended as far as that of the French, to prevent being doubled, Graves delayed engaging until the French admiral had formed up his line. Even at that, the French line was badly formed, with Bougainville's squadron well to the windward.

Graves had three methods of closing with the French from which to chose. As Harold A. Larrabee explains, he could

- order each ship to turn at right angles, bear down on its opposite number in the French line, and luff up to reform the line of battle
- maintain the line-ahead with the leading ship bearing obliquely toward the French, resuming a parallel position as, one by one, the proper distance was reached

- have each vessel turn obliquely in its position in the line and come down with the wind on its quarter toward its opponent until within range, then resume the parallel line

Each of these methods possessed two disadvantages, in varying degrees: they exposed the attackers to the enemy's raking fire along the length of the deck while depriving them for a time from using the firepower of their own broadsides.

About 3 P.M., by issuing the order by signal flags to "lead more to starboard, or toward the enemy," Graves indicated that he was choosing the second of these methods. This method minimized the two disadvantages stated above, but entailed its own additional cost: The two fleets approached each other at an angle, so that when the vans clashed, the center and rear were well out of range, thus defeating Graves's intention of attacking all together.

By 4 P.M. the tail end of the French line of battle had passed beyond Cape Henry and Graves determined that the moment to engage had at last arrived. The British admiral broke out a signal to bear down on the enemy and engage more closely, but for eight minutes left flying the signal for line-ahead. The flag signals confused the commanders in the other ships, since it was impossible for a ship both to maintain its place in the line, that is, in a line running from the lead ship through the flagship, and to bear down at right angles to the enemy. In bearing down, Graves's flagship, the *London*, advanced farther toward the enemy than the ships ahead of him. In luffing up to bring its broadsides to bear, the *London* ended up masking the fire of the next ship ahead in the line. In an attempt to relieve the bunching up of the ships forward of the flag, Graves ordered the signal for maintaining the line hoisted once more. According to Graves, he had that signal

lowered a few minutes later. But Hood and at least one of his captains in the rear believed that it flew continuously until about 5:30 P.M. Hood, in command of the rear, maintained the line-ahead. As the British van bore down on the French, the angle of the British line became more oblique, moving the rear farther from the action. About 5 P.M. the wind shifted more easterly, putting the British rear even more to the windward. The rear never engaged. Around 6:30, as darkness fell, Graves disengaged.

Tactically the Battle off the Virginia Capes was indecisive. Both fleets had ships badly shot up. The British had five ships of the line particularly injured. As would be expected, the ships in the vans of both fleets received the bulk of the damage. The seventy-four-gun HMS *Terrible*, which had been leaking badly when it sailed from the West Indies, was so injured that the British abandoned and burned it. Over the next several days, while the two fleets sailed within sight of each other, it became clear that the British fleet was in no condition to act in concert in another engagement. The French admiral was content not to resume battle, but simply to keep the Virginia Capes clear. This was in accord with French doctrine that the goal of the fleet was not winning battles but achieving ulterior ends. On September 9, convinced that Barras must have made it in safely, de Grasse sailed back to the Chesapeake, arriving on September 11 and finding Barras's squadron there. Washington and Rochambeau reached the Yorktown peninsula on September 14; their entire force had arrived by September 26. With the urging of the generals, de Grasse, despite his commitment to the Spanish, agreed to remain until the end of October.

It occurred to Graves too late that he might try to beat de Grasse back to the Chesapeake and bar his way. On September 13 the British admiral decided to return to



New York, repair his ships, and prepare for possible offensive operations with reinforcements expected from England. On September 24, three additional ships of the line arrived.

A British council of war in New York determined that the only way to save Cornwallis's army was by landing troops from New York near Yorktown. Such an amphibious landing in the face of a superior army and fleet was an impracticable undertaking, and even if the landing succeeded, the British numbers of troops would still be inferior.

On October 17, Graves's ships were repaired and ready; on October 18, 7,000 rank and file embarked; on October 19, twenty-five ships of the line set sail; and on October 24 they learned that Cornwallis had surrendered on the 19th.

Decisive local superiority at sea, attained through the cooperation of three allies, the United States, France, and Spain, sealed the fate of the British Army at Yorktown. British strategy had assumed that the Royal Navy would maintain a continuity of naval superiority in North America. When the British lost that, they lost America.

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