



Cabot Strait

BATTLE OFF SPANISH RIVER
OFF SPANISH RIVER, CAPE BRETON ISLAND
-21-22 July 1781-

On 18 July 1781 a British convoy sailed from Halifax, Nova Scotia bound for the coal mines at Spanish River, on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.¹ The convoy was composed of sixteen vessels bound for the mines; an armed ship, the *Vernon*, with soldiers from the 70th Regiment, who were going to dig the coal;² and four vessels bound for Quebec, Quebec, with cargoes of salt and flour.³

Serving as an escort for the convoy were HM Frigate *Charlestown* (Captain Henry Francis Evans),⁴ HM Sloop *Vulture* (Commander Rupert George)⁵ and HM Armed Ship *Allegiance* (Commander David Phips).⁶ The Quebec Provincial Marine Ship *Jack* (Commander Richard Peter

¹ "An impartial Narrative of the engagement between his Majesty's Ship *Vulture*, *Charlestown*, and the *Astrea* and *Hermione* French frigates, on the 21st of July, off Nova Scotia," in *The Royal Gazette*, Saturday, December 8, 1781, hereafter "Impartial Narrative."

² Shortt, Adam, and Doughty, Sir Arthur G., *Canada and its provinces; a history of the Canadian people and their institutions*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1913, 222.

³ "On board of His Most Christian Majesty's Frigate, the *Astrea*, July 23, 1781, Copy of Capt. la PÉROUSE's letter, Commander of His Most Christian Majesty's Frigate the *Astrea*, from Cape D:Vaisseaux.," in *The Independent Ledger, and the American Advertiser* [Boston], Monday, August 20, 1781, hereafter "La Pérouse Letter I"; "Extract of a letter from M. de la Perouse, to M. de Barras, dated July 23, 1781," in *The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, August 27, 1781, hereafter "La Pérouse Letter II." This is either a different translation of the first letter, or a separate letter.

⁴ *Charlestown* was former Continental Navy Ship (Frigate) *Boston*, taken at the fall of Charlestown, South Carolina. She was taken into the Royal Navy and commissioned on 15 May 1780, as a 28-gun 6th rate. Her measured tonnage (in round numbers) was 513 tons, and her nominal crew 220 men. [Information furnished by R. Brooks e-mail, 8/15/10]

⁵ *Vulture* was a Swan class sloop-of-war, launched 18 March 1776. She measured 305 tons in round numbers and had a nominal crew of 125 men. [R. Brooks e-mail, 8/15/10]

⁶ *Allegiance* was a former French merchant vessel of about 200 tons, used as a British merchant vessel, or privateer. As a British warship she had a nominal crew of 125 men. [R. Brooks e-mail, 8/15/10]

Vernon was also armed with fourteen guns, as was one of the Quebec bound vessels, a British victualler, the *Thompson*, which mounted six guns and had a crew of twelve men aboard.¹⁰

Charlestown was undergunned and undermanned. Although she was supposed to be a twenty-eight gun ship, she mounted only twenty-four 9-pounders and two 6-pounders. Her nominal crew was 200 men but only 180 men were aboard at this time.¹¹ *Vulture*, supposed to have fourteen guns, actually mounted sixteen 6-pounders, and had a spare aboard that could be shifted about. *Vulture's* nominal crew was 125 men, but she was short-handed too, with only ninety-nine men aboard. *Allegiance* had a nominal crew of 125 men, and mounted sixteen 9-pounders and two 3-pounders.¹²

The convoy sailed northeast along the coast of Nova Scotia, then Cape Breton Island. Early in the morning of 21 July the British rounded Scatarie Island and proceeded towards Spanish River. The wind seems to have been shifting from west to southwest and back, which made the short trip tedious for the British. About 1000 the convoy arrived at the entrance of Spanish River [now Sydney Harbour]. Just as Captain Evans was preparing to issue orders for the convoy to separate, two strange sail were seen to leeward.¹³

⁷ *Jack* was the former Massachusetts Privateer Ship *Jack*, listed as 130 tons. She had been captured in 1780, and may have been purchased by Tonge, and hired to the Quebec provincial force. According to Shortt, *Canada and its provinces*, 222, she measured 160 tons, mounted fourteen 6-pounders and 9-pounders, and had a crew of sixty-seven men. Perouse gives her fourteen 9-pounders. "Vue du Combat Soutenu Par Les Fregates francaises," a drawing by Lieutenant de frégate Jean Mullon, an auxiliary officer aboard *L'Hermione*. Hereafter, "Mullon Drawing," gives her ten 9-pounders and four 6-pounders.

⁸ Impartial Narrative

⁹ Impartial Narrative

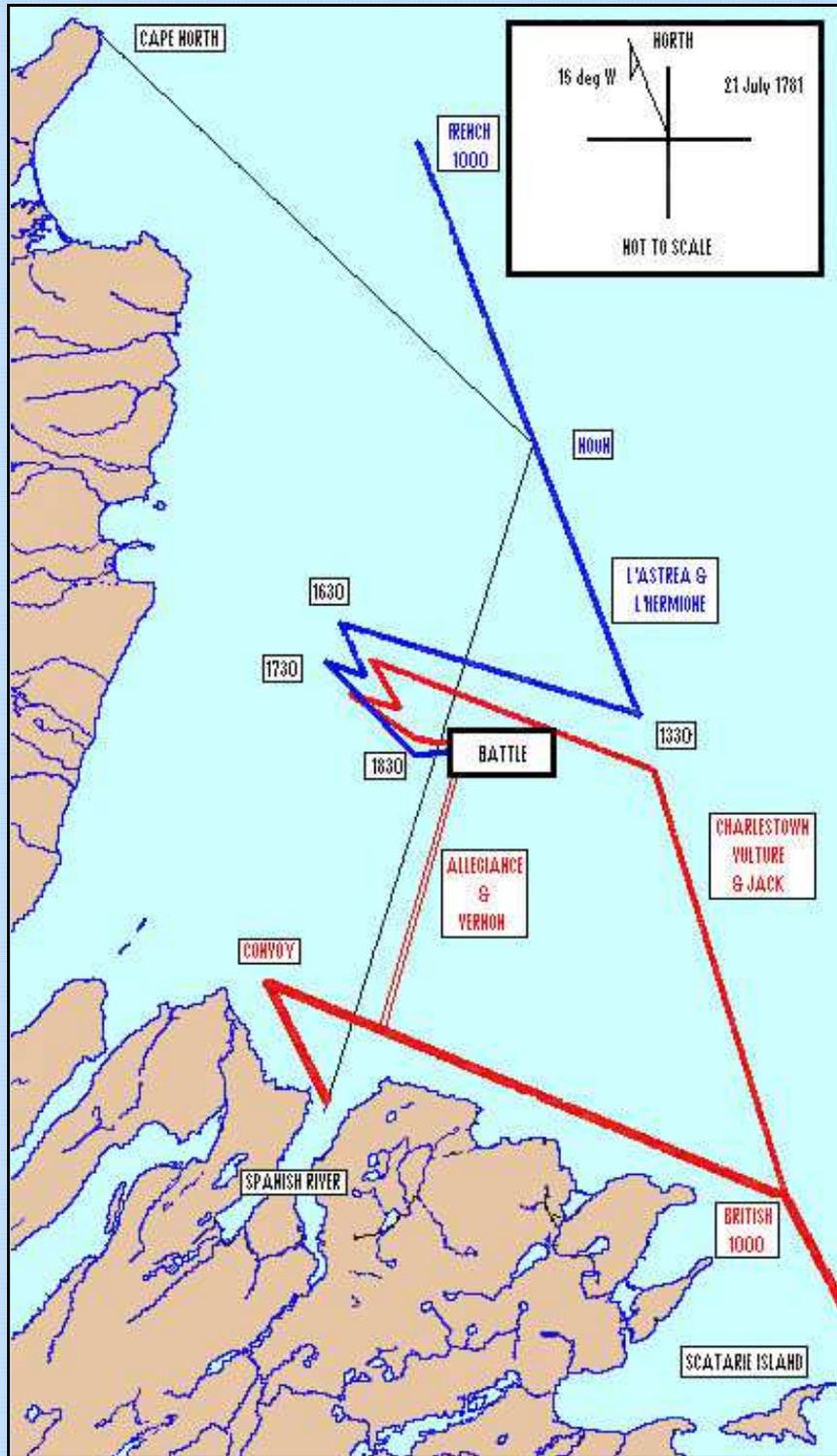
¹⁰ *The Royal Gazette* [New York], November 7, 1781, from *The Halifax Journal* of October 5, 1781, a letter of Commander Rupert George, hereafter "George's Letter." The French reports give the *Vernon* between twenty and twenty-four 9-pounders. The "Impartial Narrative" says she had fourteen guns, of which eight were 9-pounders. "George's Letter" refers to her as a "light transport" of fourteen guns. She has been tentatively identified as the *Vernon* (Francis Hull), 480 tons. [R. Brooks e-mail] The French accounts supply the name of the *Thompson*. The French give her up to twenty 9-pounders. All observers agree she took no part in the action.

¹¹ Impartial Narrative. According to Mullon, she had four 6-pounders aboard.

¹² Impartial Narrative.

¹³ Impartial Narrative.





Modern map of the north shore of Cape Breton Island. The large river near Sydney Mines was formerly Spanish River [now Sydney Harbor]. Positions are approximated.

Charlestown immediately made sail and chased the strangers, raising signals for the convoy to go into port, and for the *Vulture* to follow her. *Jack* soon left the convoy and followed the other two ships. About 1400 the strangers were made out to be two large frigates. When *Charlestown* made the private signals the strangers were unable to answer. The British ships immediately hauled their wind, to beat up to, and rejoin, the convoy.¹⁴

The enemy, as they were now clearly seen to be, were HMCN Frigates *L'Astrée* (Capitaine de vaisseau Jean-François de Galoup, Comte de La Pérouse)¹⁵ and *L'Hermione* (Lieutenant de vaisseau Louis-René Levassor, Comte de Latouche-Tréville).¹⁶ Pérouse had sailed from Boston, Massachusetts on a sweep up the northeast to interfere with British shipping, to demonstrate the ability of the French king, through the Marine Royale, to relieve the Americans, and to generally create as much trouble for the British as possible.

Both French frigates were relatively new, had been coppered, and were fast, large and effective vessels. Both had been up gunned: *L'Astree* mounted twenty-eight 12-pounders and ten 6-pounders, while *L'Hermione* had added two 6-pounders to her nominal six guns of that caliber.¹⁷ They had already taken several prizes on their cruise.



Jean-François de Galoup, Comte de La Pérouse.

On 21 July the French were cruising in the Cabot Strait, “in view” of Scatarie Island. This means perhaps, that they had passed Scatarie the evening before. According to the log of *L'Hermione*, she hailed *L'Astrée* at 0300, which was then to the northeast of her. At 0800 the French took the starboard tack, with a light breeze from the west, and steering SSW.¹⁸ According to La Pérouse, they were then about eighteen or nineteen miles southwest [southeast] of Cape

¹⁴ Impartial Narrative.

¹⁵ *L'Astrée* was launched in 1780 at Brest, carried twenty-six 12-pounders and six 6-pounders and measured 938 tons in round numbers. She had a nominal crew of 290 men and had been coppered. Demerliac, Alain, *La Marine de Louis XVI: Nomenclature des navires français de 1774 à 1792*, Nice: Editions Omega, 1966, 357, 359.

¹⁶ *L'Hermione* was launched in 1779 at Rochefort, carried twenty-six 12-pounders and six 6-pounders, and measured in round numbers, 889 tons. She had a nominal crew of between 280 and 292 men and had been coppered. Demerliac, *Marine de Louis XVI*, 370, 372.

¹⁷ Mullon Drawing

¹⁸ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*, from [here](#). The poor translations are mine. Hereafter “Log of *L'Hermione*.”

North, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.¹⁹ At 0930, from the mastheads of *L'Hermione*, sails were sighted away to the far southeast. Latouche-Tréville supposed they had doubled Scatarie Island.²⁰ At 1000 the sails were seen to be “on the wind;” a convoy, escorted by several warships.²¹ The ships were about fifteen miles to windward.²² La Pérouse signaled a chase, and ordered his ships cleared for action at the same time. Both ships set all sail and stood down toward the convoy,²³ close hauled on the starboard tack.²⁴

The French soon saw what they interpreted as “two frigates,” coming out with the wind and quitting their convoy, which continued close to the wind, steering for Spanish River, to which place they were very close. “As we were doing our utmost to approach the enemy’s frigates, these were soon only a league from us, when they closed the wind, by making signals” of recognition. When the British ships made signals, the French reefed in sail, and attempted to answer the signals, but naturally were unsuccessful.²⁵ Latouche-Tréville stated that this was about 1230, and that “we recognized her as a frigate pierced for twelve guns, and the battery of the two others as one of 20-22 and one of 14-16. At 1200 *L'Hermione* made her position as NW by 1/4 N of Cape North, and the entrance of Spanish Bay as SW 1/4 S.²⁶ In a different translation of the same report, La Pérouse said he “took no notice” of these signals.²⁷ La Pérouse was trying to induce uncertainty among the British. The two “frigates” were soon joined



Louis-René Levassor, Comte de Latouche-Tréville.

¹⁹ La Pérouse Letter I. This position, however is impossible, as it would put the French on the western coast of Cape Breton. I presume this is a mistranslation for southeast.

²⁰ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*

²¹ La Pérouse Letter I

²² “Extract of a letter from M. de la Perouse, to M. de Barras, dated July 23, 1781,” in *The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, August 27, 1781, hereafter “La Pérouse Letter II.” This is either a different translation of the first letter, or a separate letter.

²³ La Pérouse Letter I

²⁴ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*

²⁵ La Pérouse Letter I

²⁶ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*

²⁷ La Pérouse Letter II

by a third ship, which appeared to the French to be nothing but an advice ship,²⁸ or a small sloop-of-war. [the *Jack*].²⁹

“Seeing that the enemy continued to keep close to the wind, I unbent the lower sails again, . . . I in my turn chased them, and tacked about upon their fleet,”³⁰ then about twelve miles away,³¹ “in order that they might approach me to defend it ; but unhappily that fleet was much to the wind, and my tacking carried me off two leagues under the wind of her . . .” LaTouche-Tréville said that “At 1:30 the frigate was joined by two others, which had been downwind, while the convoy made full sail and sped along, taking the port tack. We chased and were forced to sail on the same tack, being three quarters of a mile from the nearest ship.”³² La Pérouse saw he could not close on the convoy, and turned toward the British ships, which had followed him about three miles off. As soon as the French turned back the British began to fall back.³³

La Pérouse was now concerned that it was getting late in the day. He “saw with the greatest concern, that it would be impossible for me to begin the engagement before seven or eight o’clock, in the afternoon . . .” As if undecided which plum to pick, he tacked back toward the convoy. He says he was certain that he could not reach it, “though but a league off the harbour : But I wanted to be assured, that if among the fleet there was not other men of war, excepting the three frigates that were behind me, and which I had cut off from the fleet : Soon after at a signal the commander made, who always was athwart of me in the wind, and a little backward, I saw three ships detach themselves from the fleet passing to the wind of our two frigates, and rallying the three that were behind me . . .” Meanwhile the convoy entered the harbor.³⁴

As soon as the French saw the British withdrawing toward the convoy, they raised more sail. At the same time the wind shifted in their favor. The two French frigates were able to cut off the three British from reaching the convoy without fighting. The British noted the French were “remarkable fast sailing ships.” About 1700 Evans signaled for the *Allegiance* and HM Transport *Vernon* (Francis Hull),³⁵ to leave the convoy and join the other three British ships. At the same

²⁸ La Pérouse Letter I

²⁹ La Pérouse Letter II

³⁰ La Pérouse Letter I

³¹ La Pérouse Letter II

³² Extract from the log of *L’Hermione*

³³ La Pérouse Letter I

³⁴ La Pérouse Letter I

³⁵ The identification is tentative. *Vernon* was 480 tons.

time Evans indicated the enemy was of superior force.³⁶ Latouche-Tréville said, of this part of the maneuvering: “At 4:30, they having gained some ground, we took the starboard tack. At the same time, they also took the starboard tack. At 5:00 we took the port tack, directing our route toward the convoy, which had dispersed, which held the wind on the starboard tack, and they got into Spanish Bay. Two armed vessels came out and maneuvered to join the other three, who had formed a line to hold their ground when they realized we had taken the [port tack]. When we got into the wake of the last two, we tacked to try to cut them off. Then, the frigate and the two others nearest us, waited until the other two joined and formed a line-of-battle.”³⁷ The *Allegiance* and the *Vernon* joined the three ships about 1900, and a line of battle was formed, and the British awaited the approach of the French, who were now on the windward quarter of the British.³⁸

La Pérouse now tacked again and steered for the warships. He saw five of them form a “kind of line,” and wait for him to come down. The third of the newcomers “appeared to fear doing his duty, and always kept out of reach of the cannon. I had desired to much the whole day to join the enemy, in order that his countenance tho’ firm, might impose upon me ; I ran upon him with forced sails, I had not a minute to loose, and it was seven o’clock in the afternoon, when we fired the first guns shot—The *Hermione* always was at hearing—I hailed M. Destouches to be ready, that we may go and attack the enemy ; he desired it with as much eagerness as myself ; both our equipages [crew] and officers were actuated with the same sentiments, and our only grief were, that we should not be able to prolong the length of the day, and to have a very dark night to fear.”³⁹ La Pérouse, in his second translation, said “I ordered M. de la Touche to follow me within the distance of half a musket shot, and we both advanced along the line of the enemy to leeward, in order to cut them off from all hope of escaping by fleeing before the wind.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, “From the extreme heavy sailing of the *Allegiance*, that ship and the *Vernon* had scarcely joined the others . . .”⁴¹ when the British hastily re-formed their line as follows: *Allegiance* led, followed by the *Vernon*, *Charlestown*, *Vulture*, and the *Jack*. The merchant vessel *Thompson* lay some ways to windward, out of the fight. Her skipper had only come out to get a better view of the action.⁴²

The French, “observing our determined purpose of fighting them,” came down towards the

³⁶ Impartial Narrative

³⁷ Extract from the log of *L’Hermione*

³⁸ Impartial Narrative

³⁹ La Pérouse Letter I

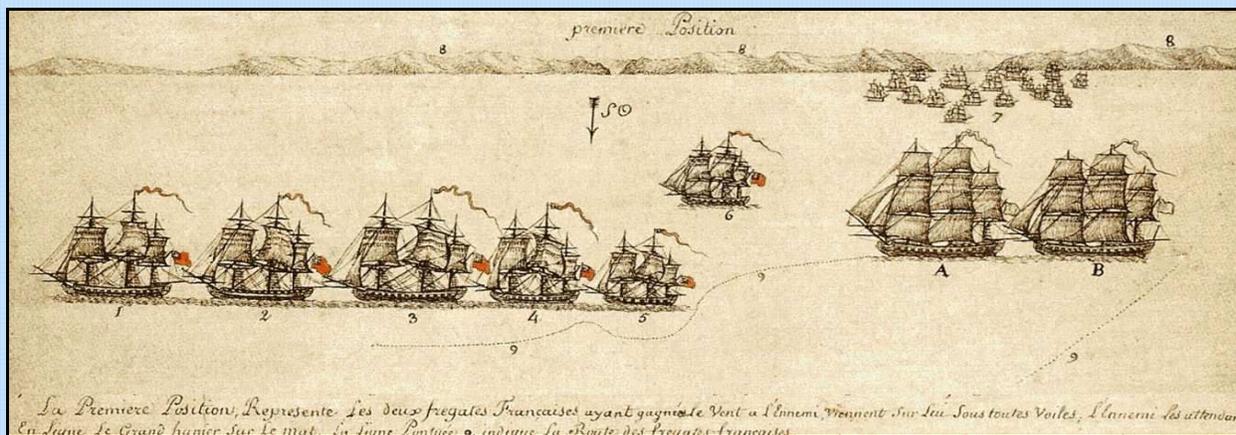
⁴⁰ La Pérouse Letter II

⁴¹ Geirge’s Letter

⁴² Extract from the log of *L’Hermione*; Mullon Drawing; George’s Letter



British lee, seemingly with the purpose “of raking separately the ships of smaller force, hoping by this manœuvre either to disable or disperse them, then to pour their whole force on the Charlestown frigate.”⁴³ The maneuver worked perfectly for the French: “As we advanced the small squadron of the enemy fell into disorder,” said La Pérouse.⁴⁴ The French fired, at maximum range, some random shot into the squadron, and then closed the British.⁴⁵



Part of a detailed drawing by Lieutenant de frégate J. Mullon, an auxiliary officer aboard *L'Hermione*. This, the “premiere,” or first, position, shows the position of the French frigates as they approached the British line. The dotted line (marked 9) shows the French course as they approached on the port tack, gained the windward and got in the wake of the British line, and then passed to leeward, wind at the southwest. The labels are (1) *Allegiance*, (2) *Vernon*, (3) *Charlestown*, (4) *Vulture*, and (5) *Jack*. The vessels marked (6) was the *Thompson*, a merchant vessel not in the fight. The convoy (7) is heading into Spanish River, between the two headlands immediately behind them. The land marked (8) is L'Isle Royale or Cape Breton Island in English. Note the British are flying the Red Ensign, and the relative size of the two French frigates are accurately shown.

As the two French frigates came back across the track of the British, “to avoid being raked the Charlestown and Vulture had occasion for a few minutes to edge away, this consequently left the other ships a small distance to windward ;”⁴⁶ This didn’t work out well for the *Vernon*: she was raked, lost six killed and six wounded, and veered out of the line.⁴⁷ The French interpreted the maneuver of the *Vulture* as sheering off: “the Vulture crowed sail to get off from us after a combat of about ten minutes : . . .”⁴⁸

⁴³ Impartial Narrative

⁴⁴ La Pérouse Letter II

⁴⁵ Impartial Narrative. The British account says that the French “raked the *Vernon*, killing six men and wounding six more. She sheered off, out of the line.” However this incident must have happened a bit later, as *Vernon* was in the front of the British line, not the rear.

⁴⁶ George’s Letter

⁴⁷ Impartial Narrative

⁴⁸ La Pérouse Letter II



The *Bataille navale de Luisbourg*, painted in 1781 by Auguste-Louis de Rossel de Cercy. Although there are some incorrect details (the smoke should be blowing over the French ships, the ships are heading south, rather than east) he has certainly portrayed the hot action in the center of the lines. Note the pennant on *L'Astrée*. No British ship reached a raking position behind *L'Astrée*, so it's not clear which vessel is intended to be there. *Jack* seems to be the small ship to the right. The fight did not take place anywhere near Louisbourg.

The two French frigates ran along the line of the British,⁴⁹ concentrating their fire on the rear of the line. *L'Astrée* moved forward and attacked the *Charlestown*; *Jack* poured a broadside into *L'Astrée* and then bore away from her big guns. Captain Evans was wounded at the first broadside from *L'Astrée's* guns, and First Lieutenant David MacKay took charge of the *Charlestown*. The *Vulture* moved up to support the *Charlestown*. Commander Phips, in the front of the line ahead of the crippled *Vernon*, now became the senior British officer.⁵⁰ The *Charlestown* was pouring a very "lively"⁵¹ fire into *L'Astrée*. *L'Hermione* was right astern: "Sailing faster than *L'Astrée* I doubled under the wind and found myself in this way . . . forced to take the front, and then to sustain [the fire of] the *Allegiance* and the *Vernon*."⁵² George, in the *Vulture*, saw *L'Hermione* pull around *L'Astrée*, and "with much judgment and undaunted bravery"⁵³ passed ahead of the *Charlestown* "to relieve her from so unequal a contest, by taking the fire of the *Hermione* . . ."⁵⁴ George brought her within pistol shot of *L'Hermione*, while the *Charlestown* and *L'Astrée* fought it out.⁵⁵

L'Hermione wasn't having it so easy. She was engaged with *Allegiance*, *Vernon*, and *Vulture*. Latouche-Tréville said, apparently referring to the *Allegiance*, "I beat this frigate with my fire for half an hour, she was obliged to do everything to move astern. The first two ships, by their fire, had damaged my rigging very much." Two times during this phase of the action *L'Hermione* was set on fire and extinguished by her crew.⁵⁶

The little *Jack* had been following an odd course. After briefly engaging *L'Astrée*, *Jack* fell out of line, moved between the two lines and briefly engaged *L'Hermione*. She moved ahead of the French frigate, reversed course and probably surrendered as she approached the French again. After passing between *L'Hermione* and *L'Astrée*, she moved to the rear of the fight.⁵⁷

The action continued for quite some time. About 2015 "the main top mast of the *Charlestown* was shot away towards the end of the engagement, as was also the ensign halliards,

⁴⁹ La Pérouse Letter I

⁵⁰ Impartial Narrative

⁵¹ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*

⁵² Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*

⁵³ Impartial Narrative

⁵⁴ George's Letter

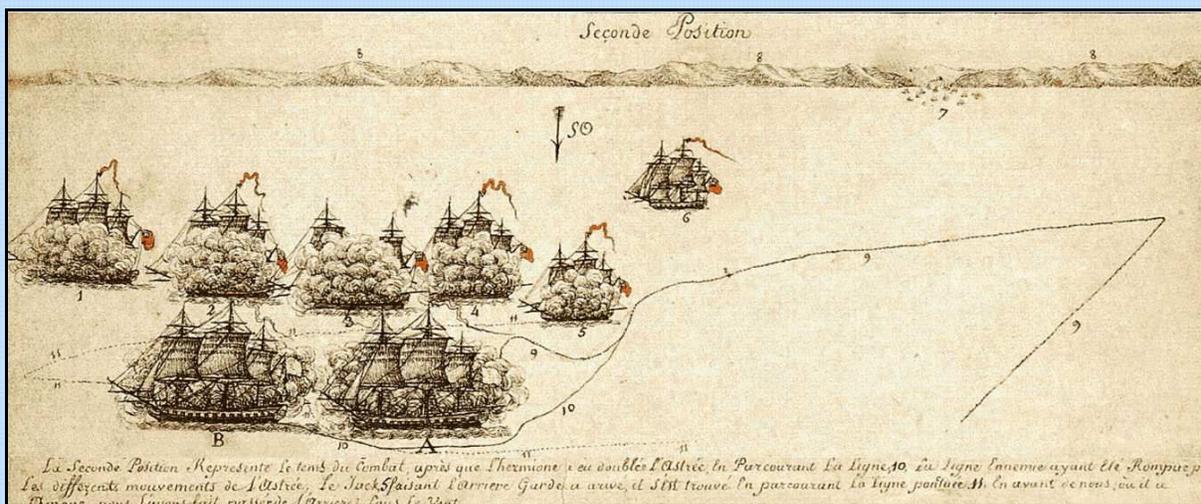
⁵⁵ Impartial Narrative

⁵⁶ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*

⁵⁷ Extract from the log of *L'Hermione*; Mullon Drawing

the ensign being then pendant in the mizen peak, instantly on this happening an English Jack was displayed in the mizen shrowds, through the activity of Lieut. Mackay, who jumped in the shrowds and set it at liberty, that the enemy might not take hopes from the Charlestown's ensign being shot away, of her being unable to continue the action." [Impartial Narrative] The French saw it a little differently: ". . . at a quarter after 8 the Charlestown, having lost her main-top mast followed the example of the Jack, and I gave orders to cease firing upon her."⁵⁸ La Pérouse, in the first translation of his letter, says "the Charlestown dismasted of her main topmast, appeared to us to have struck also, and I gave order to my battery not to fire any more upon her."⁵⁹

The remaining three British ships seem to have thought, if only briefly, that the



Mullon's second position. The track numbered (10) shows *L'Hermione* passing *L'Astrée* to her lee, and *L'Astrée* heavily engaged with *Charlestown*. *L'Hermione* probably broke the British line by raking *Vernon*. The line marked (11) shows *Jack's* track, moving across the British line, reversing course and engaging and cutting between *L'Hermione* and *L'Astrée*. Mullon's text says, in part (in very rough translation): "Represents the ending of the fight, after *L'Hermione* had doubled *L'Astrée*, following the line marked 10. The enemy's line having been broken by the different maneuvers of *L'Astrée*, the *Jack* was made the rear guard, and follows the line marked 11."

Charlestown had surrendered. *L'Astrée* began to engage the *Vulture*.⁶⁰ The French felt they couldn't send over boats to the *Charlestown*, as she ". . . was still supported by the fire of three ships, it was not possible to take possession. I continued to fight against the *Vernon* and *Alliance*

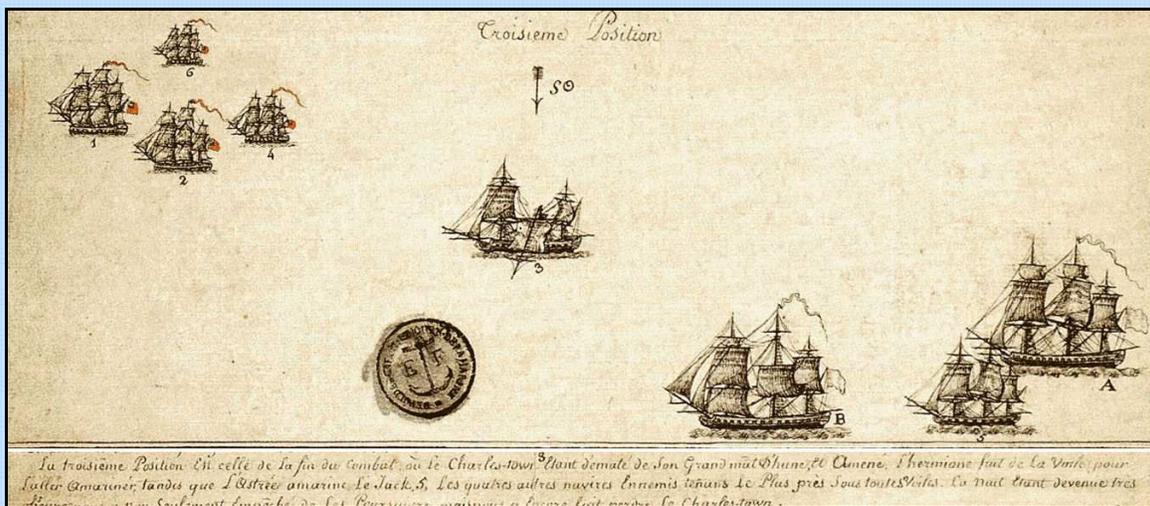
⁵⁸ La Pérouse Letter II

⁵⁹ La Pérouse Letter I

⁶⁰ George's Letter

but kept the wind despite everything they did.”⁶¹ About 2030,⁶² “. . . the other vessels which had been very roughly handled, fled from us with all the sail they could spread.”⁶³ Phips “. . . made the signal for the ships to alter their course in the night: and at day-light next morning” the French were not seen.⁶⁴

Pérouse, his rigging shot up, turned back to take possession of the *Jack*. *L’Hermione* followed: “*L’Astrée* had taken the tack on the other side and I turned to the same tack [turned to the rally]. I was in earshot and *L’Astrée* screamed at me to follow the retreating Charlestown and take possession of her if I could join her, but my running rigging was cut up, and my mast was damaged, so I was unable to make sail and follow the order.”⁶⁵



Mullon's third position. His text says, in rough translation: "The end of the battle with the Charlestown dismasted of her top mainmast. L'Hermione sets all sail to go and take possession of her while L'Astree takes the Jack. The four other ships are close hauled under full sail. The night was very dark, which not only prevented us topping our leaks, but losing the Charlestown."

L’Astrée had been damaged in the fight. According to La Pérouse, the night was very dark, “. . . my rigging were very ill treated, and I feared that soon, in spite [spite] of my night glasses, it would be impossible for me to perceive the run-aways. I took the resolution to tack, and at least to moore [moor] the *Jack* and the *Charlestown*, who both stayed behind, and were the only and certain fruits of my victory, that perhaps the enemy should have denied me, attributing

⁶¹ Extract from the log of *L’Hermione*

⁶² La Pérouse Letter I

⁶³ La Pérouse Letter II

⁶⁴ Beatson Extract

⁶⁵ Latouche-Tréville Account

either to their manœuvres, or their valour, a flight they owned to the night only. I sent my canoe onboard the *Jack*, who was the nighest, and trusted her to M. Ducandas, an auxilliary officer, very firm. I gave him orders to shut up all the English prisoners in the hold, under the care of two centries [sic] armed each with two pistols upon the hatches, to keep my canoe, which I had not the time to return, and to do his endeavour to follow me, with about 20 Frenchmen I had given him, while I was going to continue the pursuit upon the enemy.”⁶⁶

As the French were taking charge of the *Jack*, La Pérouse thought “I saw the *Charlestown* with her fore-sail set, and making an effort to escape. It was now quite dark ; I hailed M. de la Touche, to tack again for the *Charlestown*, and endeavour to keep sight of her, by the help of his night glasses : I added that I had just sent my boat on board the *Jack*, and would not wait for its return ; that I might act with him in pursuit of the enemy, M. de la Touche obeyed my orders with his usual zeal ; persuaded as well as myself, that the Captain of the *Charlestown* had acted contrary to the laws of war, a little resentment might perhaps accompany the desire we both had of compleating the victory, by the taking of the Commodore’s frigate . . .”⁶⁷

The British story of the end of the fight is quite different. About 2030 the French, “finding from the constancy and briskness of our firing our purpose was fixed and determined,” exchanged signals among themselves, and then bore away with their studding sail boom rigged. The British thought the French were steering away “for their safety” and to “take advantage of separating from us under cover of a dark night.” They steered toward the *Jack* and took possession of her.⁶⁸

The *Charlestown* and *Vulture* were so damaged in rigging, masts and sails, that “it was out of their power to renew the action . . .”⁶⁹ *Charlestown* had seven men killed and twenty-two wounded, including the master and boatswain. The damage aboard the *Vulture* was extensive: her sails were cut up, all the running rigging was cut, and most of the standing rigging, and two guns were dismantled. One man was killed and eight wounded. The three British ships stayed together during the night and repaired their damages.⁷⁰

The *Allegiance* had one killed and five wounded.⁷¹ She seems to have steered back towards Spanish River in the night, taking the *Thompson* along with her.

The French, somewhat miffed that *Charlestown* had slipped away from them, set out to

⁶⁶ La Pérouse Letter I

⁶⁷ La Pérouse Letter II

⁶⁸ Impartial Narrative

⁶⁹ Impartial Narrative

⁷⁰ Impartial Narrative

⁷¹ Beatson Extract



search for the British cripples. La Pérouse said “never a night was darker; there had been a few drops of rain, and we could perceive nothing at musket shot from us : I rallied the *Hermione* at half past 9 o’clock by the light of a fire I had ordered M. Destouch to put to the mizen-arm-yard. I had one myself, on account of our prizes, which I perceived no more, and of which I should have been very uneasy, had I not known the firmness of M. Ducandas. In short at 11 o’clock at night, not knowing what course the enemy had taken, I laid by, hoping to that perhaps the Charlestown might have had the same idea, in order to be left behind . . .”⁷² La Pérouse noted that the British “had taken particular care to conceal their lights.” *L’Astrée* laid to and awaited the *Jack*, “which still having her crew on board, would have given me much uneasiness, had I not been assured of the firmness of M. Ducandas, . . . He came up with us at two o’clock in the morning; and we lay too until day-light.”⁷³

Latouche-Tréville said, of the hunt for the cripples, “At 10:00 I lost sight of the frigate in the night’s darkness. At 10:30 I was joined by *L’Astrée*. I was able to tack my mainsail and take in my main topsail, [I] reefed all the sails . . . my main topmast being pierced by three bullets . . . At midnight, we put in through the starboard tack, with a strong wind at the SW, showing a fire [lantern] at the stern to show the direction to take. The fight lasted two hours.”⁷⁴

At dawn nothing could be seen from the French ships. Shortly after a fog rolled in which continued all day, concealing the British.⁷⁵ The wind changed to the west, and the French were soon forty miles downwind from Spanish Bay.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the British sailed for Halifax at dawn, having spent a night repairing damages. The British ships arrived at Halifax on 30 July. Captain Evans was given a military burial ashore, with honors.⁷⁷

The British thought that the “gallant behaviour of the Charlestown frigate and *Vulture* sloop,” had not only “saved themselves from being taken, but also prevented thereby the whole convoy from falling into the hands of the enemy, besides by their disabling the enemy so much as to oblige them to forsake their cruising station, and take refuge in port, they rendered an essential service. They got to Boston on the 23d in a very shattered condition.”⁷⁸

The French frigates were not “shattered,” but had been damaged. *L’Hermione* had three

⁷² La Pérouse Letter I

⁷³ La Pérouse Letter II

⁷⁴ Latouche-Tréville Account

⁷⁵ La Pérouse Letter II

⁷⁶ La Pérouse Letter I

⁷⁷ Impartial Narrative

⁷⁸ Impartial Narrative

men killed and fourteen⁷⁹ fifteen,⁸⁰ or nineteen wounded,⁸¹ *L'Astrée* had three killed and thirteen wounded. “The two frigates have suffered considerably in their rigging” said La Pérouse.⁸² Latouche-Tréville also added that “I found in my officers and my whole crew, the same courage they gave me evidence of in the battle with the *Iris* last year. . . . We were twice set on fire during the fight but it was extinguished in an instant. I fired during this fight, 509 guns [gunshots], 100 and 1700 swivel gun or blunderbuss [shots].”⁸³

La Pérouse thought the dark night prevented him from making more prizes: “I dare affirm, that had we been favoured with two hours more day-light; or a clear night, we should have taken the six vessels . . .”⁸⁴ Latouche-Tréville was of the same opinion: “I state nothing but the truth by saying that if the fight had begun two hours earlier, that all these ships would have fallen into our hands, as their fire had almost ceased. They have lost many people, particularly the frigate *Charlestown*, which, though supported by the fire of three others, was compelled to strike her flag but the darkness of night prevented us from taking possession of her.”

Night or not, Pérouse had missed an opportunity. As for the British, they were lucky to escape.

Summary Table

	<i>Tons</i>	<i>Guns</i>	<i>Broadside</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Charlestown</i>	513	26	114	180	8	4%	29	16%	37	21%
<i>Vulture</i>	305	16	48	99	1	1%	8	8%	9	9%
<i>Allegiance</i>	300	18	75	125	1	1%	5	4%	6	5%
<i>Jack</i>	130	14	63	[50]	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Vernon</i>	480	14	54	[100]	7	7%	6	6%	13	13%
Totals	1728	88	354	604	17	%	48	%	65	%
<i>L'Astrée</i>	938	36	198	290	3	1%	15	5%	18	6%
<i>L'Hermione</i>	889	34	180	280	3	1%	19	7%	22	8%
Totals	1827	70	378	570	6	1%	34	6%	40	7%

⁷⁹ La Pérouse Letter II

⁸⁰ La Pérouse Letter I

⁸¹ Latouche-Tréville Account

⁸² La Pérouse Letter II

⁸³ Latouche-Tréville Account

⁸⁴ La Pérouse Letter II



Time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

