

BATTLE OF SADRAS

Edward Hughes (*c.* 1720–1794), KB, Rear-Admiral of the Blue
to Philip Stephens (1723–1809), First Secretary to the Admiralty (1763–1795)

HMS SUPERB, at sea, 4 April 1782

I sailed on 31 January from Trincomalee for Madras road in order to get a supply of provisions and stores, of both which the ships were then in want.

On 8 February, I anchored in Madras road and the same day received advice from Lord Macartney,¹ the Governor of that place, that a French squadron consisting of thirty ships and vessels, was at anchor about twenty leagues to the northward of that port. In the afternoon of the 9th, Captain Alms² of His Majesty's Ship MONMOUTH, with the HERO, ISIS, and the armed transport MANILLA, joined me in the road.

I continued to use all possible diligence in getting the necessary stores and provisions on board the several ships until 15 February, when the enemy's squadron, consisting of twelve sail of line of battle ships, six frigates, eight large transports, and six captured vessels, came in sight to the northward, standing for Madras road, and about noon the same day anchored about four miles without the road. In the meantime I placed His Majesty's ships in the most advantageous manner to defend themselves and the other ships in the road with springs on their cables, that they might bring their broadsides to bear more effectually on the enemy, should they attempt an attack.

At four in the afternoon the enemy weighed and stood to the southward, when I immediately made the signal to weigh and stood after them, having received on board a detachment of 300 officers and men of His Majesty's 98th Regiment, who were distributed to the ships of the squadron that were the worst manned. I stood with the squadron as per margin³ to the southward all that night under easy sail, and in the morning at daylight found the enemy's ships had separated in the night, their twelve line of battle ships and a frigate bearing east of me, distant about four leagues, and sixteen sail of their frigates and transports bearing south-west, distant about three leagues and steering a direct course for Pondicherry. On which I instantly made the signal for a general chase to the south west, in order, if possible, to come tip with and take their transports, well knowing the enemy's line of battle ships would follow to protect them all in their power.

In the course of the chase our copper-bottomed ships came up with and captured six sail of ships and vessels, five of which were English taken by the enemy when to the northward of Madras, out of which I ordered the Frenchmen to be taken, and the vessels to proceed with their own crews to Negapatnam. The sixth was the *LAURISTON*, a transport, having on board many French officers, 300 men of the Regiment of Lausanne, and laden with guns, shot, powder, and other military stores. This ship, so valuable to us, and of so much consequence to the enemy, was taken. by Captain Lumley⁴ of His Majesty's Ship ISIS.

So soon as the enemy's squadron discovered my intention to chase their transports, they put before the wind and made all the sail they could after me; and by three o'clock in the afternoon, four of their best-sailing line of battle ships were got within two or three miles of our stern-most ships, and the ships in chase were very much spread by the enemy's ships they were chasing steering different courses, some to the SE others to the S and several to the SW. I therefore judged it necessary to make the signal for the chasing ships to join me, which they all did about seven o'clock in the evening, and I continued standing to the SE under an easy sail all that night, the enemy's squadron in sight, and making many signals.

¹ George (1737–1806), Baron Macartney, Governor of Madras (1781–1785)

² Captain James Alms (1728–1791)

³ SUPERB, EXETER, MONARCA, HERO, WORCESTER, BURFORD, MONMOUTH, EAGLE, ISIS, SEAHORSE, and COMBUSTION

⁴ Captain Thomas Lumley (*c.* 1759–1782)

At daylight in the morning of the 17th, the body of the enemy's squadron bore N by E of ours, distant about three leagues, the weather very hazy, with light winds and frequent squalls of short duration from the NNE, the enemy crowding all the sail they could towards our squadron.

At six in the morning, I made the signal for our squadron to form the line of battle ahead. At twenty-five minutes past eight, our line ahead being formed with great difficulty from the want of wind and frequent intervals of calm, I made the signal for the leading ship to make the same sail as the Admiral, and made sail for me in the line ahead, intending to weather the enemy, that I might engage them more closely.

At ten, the enemy's squadron, having the advantage of the squalls from the NNE (which always reached them first, and in consequence continued longest with them), neared us very fast and I made the signal for our line to alter the course two points to leeward, the enemy then steering down on the rear of our line in an irregular double line abreast.

At half-past noon, I made the signal for our squadron to form the line of battle abreast, in order to draw the rear of our line closer to the centre, and prevent the enemy from breaking in on it and attacking it when separated. At three in the afternoon, the enemy still pushing on to our rear in a double line abreast, I again altered my course in the line in order to draw our rear ships still closer to the centre. And, at forty minutes after three, finding it impossible to avoid the enemy's attack under all the disadvantages of little or no wind to work our ships, and of being to leeward of them, I made the signal for our squadron to form at once into the line of battle ahead.

At four, the EXETER (which was the stern-most ship in our rear when formed in a line of battle ahead on the larboard tack) not being quite closed to her second ahead, three of the enemy's ships in the first line bore right down upon her, whilst four more of their second line, headed by the *HÉROS*, in which ship Monsieur Suffren¹ had his flag, hauled along the outside of the first line towards our centre. At five minutes past four, the enemy's three ships began their fire on the EXETER, which was returned by her and her second ahead. At ten minutes past four, I made the signal for battle, and at twelve minutes past, the action became general from our rear to the centre, the commanding ship of the enemy, with the others of their second line, leading down to our centre, yet never at any time advancing farther than opposite to the SUPERB, our centre ship, with little or no wind, and some heavy rain during the engagement.

Under these circumstances the enemy brought eight of their best ships to the attack of five of ours, as the van of our line, consisting of the MONMOUTH, EAGLE, BURFORD, and WORCESTER, could not be brought into action without tacking on the enemy. And although the signal for that purpose was at the mast-head ready for hoisting, there was neither wind sufficient to enable them to tack nor for the five ships of our centre and rear, then engaged with the enemy, hard-pressed and much disabled in their masts, yards, sails, and rigging, to follow them without an almost certainty of separating our van from our rear.

At six in the afternoon, a squall of wind from the SE took our ships and paid them round ahead on the enemy to the north-eastward, when the engagement was renewed by our five ships with great spirit and alacrity from our starboard guns. And at twenty-five minutes past six, just before dark, the enemy's ships engaged with our's, having visibly suffered severely, the whole of them hauled their wind and stood to the NE.

At this time the SUPERB had lost her main-yard, shot into two pieces in the slings, had five feet [of] water in her hold, and continued for some time to gain on all her pumps until several of the largest shot-holes under water were plugged up, and neither brace nor bowline left entire. And the EXETER, almost reduced to the state of a wreck, had made a signal of distress. The other three ships in our rear, the MONARCA, ISIS, and HERO, had suffered less, as the enemy's fire appeared plainly to be directed principally against the SUPERB and EXETER.

¹ Admiral Pierre André de Suffren de Saint Tropez (1729–1788), commander of French naval forces in the East Indies

It is with particular pleasure I have to acquaint their Lordships that the officers and men of the five ships engaged against so superior a force of the enemy behaved throughout the whole action with the greatest steadiness and bravery.

After the action I stood to the southward under little sail all night, and in the morning at daylight found the SUPERB's main-mast, fore-mast, and bowsprit so much wounded as to render it exceeding dangerous to carry sail on them. The EXETER's masts were also much damaged, and the shot-holes in all the ships that had been engaged so far under water as to render it impossible to stop them but by giving the ships deep heels in smooth water. All which, and the wind continuing to blow from the northward, determined me to proceed to Trincomalee as the only proper place to re-fit the dis-abled ships, and I accordingly arrived there on the 24th. And having done, with the utmost expedition, what repairs were absolutely necessary to put the dis-abled ships into a condition for service, I sailed from that place with the squadron on the 4th of last month.

Abstract of the killed and wounded on board His Majesty's ships

<u>Ships</u>	<u>Killed</u>	<u>Wounded</u>	<u>Total</u>
SUPERB	11	25	36
EXETER	10	45	55
MONARCA	1	5	6
HERO	9	17	26
ISIS	1	3	4

Among whom were the under-mentioned officers

SUPERB — Captain Stevens,¹ wounded (since dead); Lieutenants Hughes and Newcombe, wounded.

EXETER — Captain Reynolds,² killed ; Lieutenant Charles Jones, wounded.

“Biographical Memoirs of the Late Sir Edward Hughes, KB”, *The Naval Chronicle* 9 (February 1803):92–95.

¹ Captain William Stevens (–1782)

² Captain Henry Reynolds (–1782)