A Naval Battle Off Malacca

by

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The battle described below was fought between the French frigate *Pourvoyeuse* (Captain Trommelin, 44 guns) on the one side, and four British East Indiamen and the country ship *Shah Byramgore* on the other. The East Indiamen were the *Locko* (Captain Peter Lawson), the *Osterley* (Captain Samuel Rogers), the *Asia* and the *Essex*, bound from Bombay to Canton. The main body of the French fleet under Admiral Suffren had fought a heavy battle with the fleet of Admiral Sir Edward Hughes off Trincomali on 3 September, 1782; but the *Pourvoyeuse* may have been detached to obtain timber in the Straits of Malacca, or to prey on the British China fleet. The description quoted below has been reproduced from a copy of the *Locko’s* log in vol. 514 of the Home Miscellaneous Series at the India Office Library, London. It is possible that other versions of the battle in the Malacca Straits can be found in the logs of the *Osterley*, *Asia* and *Essex*, if they have been preserved in the Marine Records at the India Office Library. The incident is an interesting indication of the spirit of some of the East India Company’s captains and of their eagerness to take the offensive against an enemy ship of war.

“Ship *Locko* in the Straights of Malacca, 1782. September 6th, 7 a.m., saw a Vessel laying at Anchor close in with the Malay Shore, Mount Formosa bear-

2. Samuel Rogers served as chief officer of the *Plassey* East Indiaman in 1768 and came out to Calcutta on the old *Osterley* as captain in December 1778. After leaving Calcutta bound for London in March 1779, his ship was captured by a French privateer and taken to Mauritius; a fact which may explain his spirited resistance against the *Pourvoyeuse* in 1782. Rogers also enjoyed a fight, if we are to believe William Hickey, the famous diarist, who met his friend Rogers in London in 1780 when the captain was watching a boxing match in Cheapside. Rogers usually lived in Camberwell when he was in London, but he was of American birth, swore liberally, chewed large quantities of tobacco, and was indifferent to his unkempt appearance. Nevertheless, Hickey described him as a fine-hearted man, a loyal friend, and an unsurpassed master of his profession. Rogers seems to have left the service of the Company in July 1786. See Cotton, *East Indiamen*, pp. 25, 27; also A. Spencer, *Memoirs of William Hickey*, II, pp. 269–270.

3. Rio Formosa was the old Portuguese name for the Simpang river, which reached the sea at Batu Pahat, about 52 miles down the coast from Malacca. Mount Formosa must have been the present Mount Ophir, 4,187 ft., in view of the bearing given.

1. In his *East Indiamen: The East India Company’s Maritime Service*, (London, 1949), p. 39, Sir Evan Cotton identifies the captain of the *Locko* as Peter Lawson, not Patrick Lawson. Peter Lawson was the brother-in-law of Richard Sullivan of the Madras Civil Service and of Sir Benjamin Sullivan (1749–1810), one of the first judges of the Madras Supreme Court. Lawson made two voyages to Canton as captain of the *Lord Holland* between 1775 and 1779, but was deprived of his command in the latter year for smuggling goods into England. The directors re-employed him in March 1781 as captain of the *Locko*, which, strangely enough, was the former French ship *Modeste*. On his return to England, after the fight with the *Pourvoyeuse* described in this article, Lawson was again denounced for smuggling by one of his crew. He evaded a fine of nearly £100,000 by fleeing to Vizagapatam in India, where he died as a prosperous free merchant in October 1820.
ing N.W. ½ N. Made Sail towards her in hopes of learning some intelligence of what force the Enemy had in the Straits; we soon discovered the sail to be a two Mast Vessel with Malay Colours Hoisted. At 10 a.m. brought up with the Kedge anchor in 22 fathom Water, close alongside of her; brought the Master of her on board, who informed me of one large and two small French Ships, being at Anchor to the Eastward of Pulo Pisang⁴ and that they had asked her if she had seen nothing of the five Ships from Bombay,⁵ which made me think that they were cruising purposely for us, but did not believe their strength superior to ours.

7th. At 3 p.m. made the Signal to weigh, but it falling very little Wind and the current [being] against us, at 7 p.m. made the Signal to anchor. came too [sic] with the small Bower in 10 fathom water; purchased 18 Leagers of Arrack from the Malay Vessel. At 11 a.m. made the Signal to weigh and kept turning to Windward, the Current being in our favour.

8th. At 3 p.m., it falling quite calm and the current shifting against us, came too [sic] with the Kedge in 20 fathom water. At 5 Weighed per Signal with a light breeze from the Southward and turned to Windward, and at Midnight came to an Anchor per Signal in 19 fathom water, with the Kedge. At day light got under weigh, soon afterwards saw two sail in the S.E. quarter, at anchor near Pulo Pisang; Pulo Pisang bearing of us at that time E.S.E. ½ S. 7 Leagues. Cleared Ship and got every thing ready for engaging; kept turning to Windward with all the Sail I could crowd and a favourable current. At 9 a.m. discovered one of them to be a very large Ship and the other Vessel was sloop rigged. At 10 a.m. I hoisted Dutch Colours,⁶ at which time they both got under Sail, and stood right for us; I then made the Signal for the Ships to form the line of Battle ahead at two Cables lengths distance, not knowing how many consorts the above Ship might have under Cover of the Island Pulo Pisang; kept turning to Windward under Dutch Colours.

9th. At ½ past 3 p.m. the Current being against us, made the Signal to Anchor, came too [sic] with the Kedge in 20 fathom Water, as did the two strange sail. They neared us very little more than if they had been at anchor, as there was scarcely Wind sufficient to stem the current. Saw the strange Ship mann all her yards at once to furl her sails, and computed from the appearance she made that she had considerably more than 500 men, all Europeans, and counted 14 Ports of a side on her Gun Deck, but could as yet see no lower tier of Ports. At ½ past 8 p.m., the current turning in our favour, made the signal for the Fleet to weigh. At 1 a.m., the tide being done, made the Signal to Anchor; came too [sic] with the Kedge in 21 fathom Water. A little before day light, saw a Sloop close under our Bows, and conceiving it to be the Sloop which the Ship had sent full of men to Board us, fired several shots into her, and made her come to an anchor close to the Ship; sent the Pinnace on board her as soon as it was light, and found her to be a Malay Vessel. At ½ past 7 a.m. made the Signal for a general chase to Windward. Soon afterwards discovered the strange sail get under weigh and turn to Windward, but saw nothing of the Sloop she had

5. The Locko, Osterley, Asia, Essex and Shah Byramgore.
6. A legitimate subterfuge, but unlikely to deceive the French, in view of the course of the ships and the unlikelihood of the Dutch mustering four East Indiamen in Malacca Strait at this time.
with her yesterday. Thinking she had dispatched her for the two other Ships as mentioned by the first Malay Vessel we spoke, I thought there should be no time lost to attack her, and I had the happiness to find I gained upon her considerably by noon. [S]till turning to Windward.

10th. Still in chase of the strange Ship, which from her great size and large quarter Galleries and stern Gallery, although not near enough to discover her lower tier of Guns, yet it was believed by all the people in my Ship that she [was] a two Decker. At ½ past 1 p.m. finding I came up with her on a Wind, she clapped her helm hard a weather and pointed right for me before the Wind. I immediately shortened Sail and lay too [sic] with my Maintopsail to the Mast, hoisted my broad Pendant and English Colours, and waited her approach, being under my Topsails and Top Gallant Sails. The Osterley soon after [passed] ahead of me and brought too [sic] about 2 Cables lengths distance, and the Shy Byramgore, a Country Ship,7 a very little way to Leeward of me. I was then on the Larboard tack; soon after I tacked, as did the Osterly, and brought too on the Starboard tack. At 10 minutes past two the Enemy began to fire her Bow Chacers, Eighteen Pounders, at me, but I resolved to reserve my fire till she came as near me as she would. The Asia at this time and the Essex had brought too, the former half a mile, and the latter a mile to Leeward of me; the Osterly about two Cables lengths ahead of me; the Shy Byramgore upon my Lee quarter, ready to obey any orders I might have for her. During the whole action, as soon as her [i.e. Pourvoyeuse] Shot went over me, she brought too right abeam of me, when I discovered her French Colours, but could see no lower tier of Guns. She gave me a broadside which I immediately returned. She kept a constant heavy fire at me for two hours and a half and which I returned in the warmest manner I could. She then filled her Topsails and run a little ahead and begun on the Osterly, who supported me during the whole time in the most Gallant manner. I could not immediately see him stealing ahead for the smoke, but as soon as I did I conceived he wanted to make off. I then made all the Sail I could upon a Wind after him, and he immediately after [made?] all he could from us. He soon afterwards tacked, and in passing him I gave him two broadsides.8 As soon as he was abaft my beam, I tacked, and when I found he kept edging away to Leeward I did the same and Steered right for him. This Manoeuvre enabled the Asia and Essex to give him their fire as he passed them. I was unwilling he should come near either of these Ships as they were weakly manned and a great many of them Lascars. I therefore kept him a little open on my weather bow, in order to cut him off from attacking these Ships.

8. At this point the battle seems to have become a pursuit of the Pourvoyeuse towards Malacca. The British fleet had been following a south-easterly course in line ahead, with the Osterley, Locko, Asia and Essex sailing in that order. Having crept ahead of the Locko to attack the Osterley, the Pourvoyeuse suddenly tacked and passed up the British line towards the north, receiving two broadsides from the Locko and one apiece from the Essex and Asia in the process. The Locko tacked in pursuit, and was given precedence by the Osterley at the specific request of Lawson, who thought he had the speed to over-haul the Frenchman.

7. A country ship was a privately-owned vessel engaged in trade between the different ports of Asia. Her captain might be an Asian or a European. In view of the captain of the Shah Byramgore placing himself under Lawson's orders during the action, the ship probably had a European owner and captain.
The Osterly being then close under my Lee, steering for him with every Sail she could crowd, I hailed her and told Captain Rogers⁹ [that] I thought I came up with the chase very fast, and desired he would drop astern of me and let me past, that I meant to go close under the Enemy’s Stern and give him my fire, and then run up alongside of him and there lay till I settled the point. Captain Rogers immediately obeyed my orders. I found I neared the Enemy very fast, which he observing, kept his stern Chacers, two Eighteen Pounders, constantly at play at my Rigging, and he had the good fortune to shoot away my Maintopsail Tye and slings, when I was almost near enough to luff up under his stern, on which the Yard came plump down on the Cap. While I was repairing this damage, I kept up as good a fire on him as I could. It was then growing dusk, and before I got my Maintopsail hoisted, it was nearly dark; I kept chacing him and firing my Bow Chacers till 8, when he put all his lights out, and could but now and then just see him. The Ships as I passed hailed me, and told me they thought he went better right before the wind than me, but I did not believe it. He was then Steering a direct course

9. The diarist, William Hickey, has described how Captain Samuel Rogers succeeded to the command of the new Osterley in September 1781. He writes: “One of the first persons I saw at Carlisle House [London] was my blackguard friend, Sam Rogers, who, coming to me, said aloud, ‘Damn my eyes, Bill, but I’m glad I’ve met with you, for I wanted to tell you that my uncle has met with a man who has a ship just finished, which as he has some pounds to fool away he had rather not command, at least, had rather not leave England as soon as she must. An exchange has therefore taken place. She is to be the Osterley and I her commander, he taking what was to have been my ship next year, so stand by, my lad, to be at a launch in five or six weeks’.” See A. Spencer, Memoirs of William Hickey, II, p. 281.
for Malacca and the wind right aft, running so far to Leeward as in all probability I must do before I got fairly alongside of him to bring him to close action, and considering how very late in the season it was, that all the Ships run a great risk then of losing their passage to China, I thought I should be excused [i.e. committing an inexcusable action] and would be doing the Public very great injury if I increased that risk. The valuable Cargo of Treasure and Goods contained in the five Ships made me trouble for their safety, in case we lost our passage, having no friendly port in these seas where we could Winter. I therefore conquered the great desire I had of having the honour to Capture this Ship, and made my wishes yield to the public good, the interest of the Honourable Company being materially concerned in the safe arrival of the five Ships at China this season. Therefore at 15 minutes past 8, I made the signal for the Fleet to haul their wind, and kept my Toplight burning all night, went under an easy sail, and kept all the Ships ahead of me, so that if the Enemy chose to renew the action he should not surprise any of the other Ships.

I lament exceedingly at not having Captured him, which I certainly would have done, had there been one hour’s more daylight, but chancing between sands in the night, whose Channels are so very narrow, that it required the clearest day to avoid their dangers, together with the aforementioned reasons, I hope the Honourable Company will believe that I did all in my power to preserve their property, as well as to destroy the Enemy. I cannot say too much in favour of my Officers and Ship’s Company, who behaved with the greatest bravery and coolness, and I beg leave to recommend them to the particular favour of the Honourable Company. The noble support which I received from the Osterly, I cannot commend too much; all that men could do Captain Rogers and his Ship’s Crew performed. I have my Boatswain and four Seamen wounded, my Sails and Rigging much cut, and received two shot between wind and water, eighteen pounders. The Osterly had two Seamen killed, and Chief Officer wounded. None of the other Ships received the least injury. The [enemy] Ship Mounted seventy eight eighteen pounders on her Gun Deck, besides two Stern and two Bow Chacers of the same metal, and twelve nine pounders on her Quarter Deck and Forecastle.

(Signed) Patrick [Peter] Lawson.”

12. This is clearly a copyist’s error for “twenty eight eighteen pounders on her Gun Deck.” Lawson had already counted fourteen gun ports on the gun deck and had realised that the Pourvoyeuse had no lower tier of guns. He was unlikely to imagine that he was engaging a 94 gun ship of the line, when Suffren’s flagship carried only 74 guns. Allowing for the copyist’s error, Lawson would have assessed his opponent accurately as a 44 gun frigate.

William Hickey witnessed the arrival of the Pourvoyeuse at Trincomali in December 1782, having left the rest of Suffren’s fleet wintering at Acheh on the northern tip of Sumatra. Hickey’s ship had inadvertently entered Trincomali harbour unaware that it had been recaptured from the British invasion force by the French, but he seems to have enjoyed the most amicable relations with his captors. He met Captain Trommelin of the Pourvoyeuse, whom he described as a family man, “quite young”. After his release, Hickey visited Admiral Sir Edward Hughes at Madras, to whom he described the Pourvoyeuse as:

“44 [guns]. Almost tumbling to pieces, and in want of every kind of stores”.

See A. Spencer, Memoirs of William Hickey, IV, p. 45–46, 111.