

THE BATTLE OF THE NILE

E. Poussielgue, Comptroller-General of French Eastern Army

Rosetta, 17 Thermidor VI (3 August 1798)

We have just been witnesses, my dear friend, to a naval combat the most bloody and unfortunate that for many ages has taken place.

The French squadron, consisting of thirteen sail of the line, one of which was a three-decker of 120 guns, and three others of eighty, were anchored in line of battle in the Bay of Aboukeir, or Canope, the only one on all the coast of Egypt. For eight days past, several ships and frigates belonging to the English have at different times been in sight, reconnoitering the position of our fleet, so that we have been in continual expectation of being attacked. In a direct line from Aboukeir to Rosetta, the distance is about four leagues and a half; from the height of the latter place our fleet is perfectly seen and distinguished. The 14th of this month, at half past five o'clock in the evening, we heard the firing of cannon: this was the commencement of the battle. We immediately got on the terraces, on the tops of houses, and on other eminences, whence we plainly perceived ten English ships of the line; the others we could not see. The cannonade was very heavy until about a quarter after nine o'clock, when, favoured by the night, we perceived an immense light which announced to us that some ship was on fire. At this time the thunder of cannon was heard with redoubled fury, and at ten the ship on fire blew up with the most dreadful explosion, which was heard at Rosetta in the same manner as the explosion of the GRENELLE at Paris. When this accident happened, the most profound silence took place for the space of about ten minutes; from the moment of the explosion until our hearing it might take up about two minutes. The firing commenced again, and continued without intermission until three in the morning: it ceased almost entirely until five, when it commenced again with as great violence as ever.

I placed myself on a tower about cannon shot from Rosetta, and which is called Aboul Mandour, whence I could distinctly see the whole battle. At eight o'clock I perceived a ship on fire, and in about half an hour, she blew up similar to the other last night. The other ships moved to a greater distance from the shore, and the fire on board her apparently diminished, by which we presume it was entirely extinguished. During this time the cannonading redoubled. A large ship entirely dismantled was on shore on the coast; we perceived others among the fleet, in a similar manner dismantled; but the two squadrons so mingled among each other, that it was impossible to distinguish French from English, nor on whose side the advantage was. The firing continued with unabating ardour until two o'clock after midday on the 15th, and at this hour we perceived two sail of the line and two frigates under a press of sail on a wind, standing to the eastward. We perceived that the whole four were under French colours. No other vessel made any movement, and the firing ceased entirely. Towards six o'clock in the evening, I returned to the tower of Aboul Mandour, to reconnoitre the position of the two fleets. It was the same as at two o'clock. The four ships under weigh were abreast of the mouth of the Nile. We knew not what to think or conjecture. Twenty-four hours passed without having any person to give us any details, and in our situation it was impossible to procure any by land on account of the Arabs, who were assembled between Rosetta and Aboukeir. There was nothing to be learnt by sea, on account of the difficulty of getting out of the opening or branch of the Nile. You may judge of our impatience and perplexity. Nothing good could be augured from this silence; however, we were obliged to pass the whole of the night of the 15th in this incertitude, and at last, on the morning of the 16th, a boat which left Alexandria in the night gave us some details, though little tending to our comfort. They told us, that the officers of the French fleet who saved themselves in a boat, arrived at Alexandria, had reported, that in the commencement of the battle, Admiral Brueys had received three severe wounds, first on the head, the second in the body; that notwithstanding he persisted in keeping his station on the arm-chest, and that a fourth took him in the body and cut him in two; at the same moment a shot took off the captain of the ship CASABIANCA; that at this time they perceived the ship to be on fire in such a manner as not to be able to extinguish it, and at last that the ship had blown up about ten o'clock at night; they added, that our fleet was totally destroyed and lost with the exception of the four ships escaped. I returned to the town, where I found things absolutely in the same situation as yesterday. They continued to last night and this morning.

I have now to say how they appeared to our view from the castle of Aboukeir: The first ship is without masts, and under English colours, the second and third are in a good state, but I cannot distinguish theirs, the fourth has lost one mast, the fifth in good state and with English colours; the sixth lost her top-mast (this morning she hoisted her

fore-top-mast-stay-sail, and set some after sail), seventh is without top-gallant-masts, eight dis-masted; ninth ditto with the exception of her bow-sprit; eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth form a kind of group, having only seven masts between them; fourteenth only her fore-mast; fifteenth has lost her fore and mizen top-gallant-masts, sixteenth is entirely dismasted, seventeenth lost her mizen top-gallant-mast; eighteenth has only her fore-mast, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty first form a group with only four masts between them, and these without top-gallant-masts; twenty-second entirely dismasted and on-shore, she has English colours up; the people on board her are trying to get her afloat, and to raise other masts; the twenty-third is in a good state, under English colours; the twenty-fourth is also in a good state. This is all that I can distinguish; from which it results, that, though the English have had the advantage, they have been very roughly handled. They could not follow the vessels that went away on the 15th.

For these two days, these ships have been perfectly inactive, and seemingly destroyed; this morning news has arrived to us from Alexandria which confirms our losses; Rear Admiral de Crest was killed, also Vice Admiral Blanquet Duchalia; five ships have struck their colours. The TONNANT was the last ship in action. Dupetitatar, who commanded her, had his two legs carried off by a cannon shot. The ships escaped are the GUILLAUME TELL, and the frigates DIANE and JUSTICE. They say it was the ARTEMIZE that blew up the morning before yesterday; many things relative to this battle are yet to learn. They say that the English Admiral has sent a flag of truce to Alexandria, demanding that they should receive and take care of the wounded, which amount to 1500. As yet I am ignorant of what has been decided on. You will receive in France the official accounts of us and of the English; I know what they will say, but you may reply on what I have written, because it is what I have seen.