

THE USS CONSTELLATION VS *LA VENGEANCE*

Captain Thomas Truxton

UNITED STATES SHIP CONSTELLATION, at Sea, 3 February 1800

To Benjamin Stoddart, Esquire, Secretary of the Navy,

On the 30th ult. I left St. Christopher's with the CONSTELLATION in excellent trim, and stood to windward, in order to gain the station for myself before the Road of Guadaloupe; and at half past seven AM of the day following I discovered a sail to the SE to which I gave chase; and for the further particulars of that chase, and for the action after it, I must beg to refer to the extracts from my Journal herewith, as being the best mode of exhibiting a just and candid account of all our transactions in the late business, which has ended in the almost entire dismantlement of the CONSTELLATION; though, I trust, to the high reputation of the American flag—I have the honour to be, &c.

Thomas Truxtun

Occurrences on board the UNITED STATES SHIP CONSTELLATION, of 38 Guns, under my Command

1 February

Throughout these twenty-four hours, very unsettled weather: kept on our tacks, beating up under Guadaloupe; and at half past seven AM the road of Basseterre bearing E five leagues distance saw a sail in the SE standing to the SW which from her situation I at first took for a large ship from Martinique, and hoisted English colours on giving chase, by way of inducement for her to come down and speak me, which would have saved us a long chase to leeward off my intended cruising ground; but finding she did not alter her course, I examined her more minutely as we approached her, and discovered that she was a heavy French frigate, mounting at least 54 guns. I immediately gave orders for the yards, &c. to be slung with chains, top sail sheets, &c. stoppered, and the ship cleared, and every thing prepared for action, and hauled down the English colours. At noon the wind became light, and I observed the chase, that we had before been gaining fast on, held way with us; but I was determined to continue the pursuit, though the running to leeward I was convinced would be attended with many serious disadvantages, especially if the objects of my wishes were not gratified.

Passed two schooners standing to the northward: one of them shewed American colours, and was a merchant vessel, and the other I supposed to be of the same description.

2 February

At one PM the wind being somewhat fresher than at the noon preceding, and appearance of its continuance, our prospect of bringing the enemy to action began again to brighten, as I perceived we were coming up with the chase fast, and every inch of canvass being set that could be of service, except the bog reefs, which I kept in the top sails, in case the chase finding an escape from our thunder impracticable, should haul on a wind and give us fair battle; but this did not prove to be her commander's intention. I however got within hail of him at eight PM hoisted our ensign, and had the candles in the battle lanthorns all lighted, and the large trumpet in the lee gangway ready to speak him, and to demand the surrender of his ship to the United States of America; but he at that instant commenced a fire from his stern and quarter guns, directed at our rigging and spars. No parley then being necessary, I sent my principal Aid-de-Camp M. Vandyke, to the different officers commanding divisions on the main battery to repeat strictly my orders, before given, not to throw away a single charge of powder, but to take good aim, and fire directly into the hull of the enemy; and load principally with two round shot and now and then with a round shot, and a stand of grape, &c. to encourage the men at their quarters; to cause or suffer no noise or confusion whatever; but to load and fire as fast as possible when it could be done with certain effect. These orders being given, in a few moments I gained a position on his weather quarter, that enabled us to return effectually his salute, and thus a close and as sharp an action as ever was fought between two frigates commenced and continued until within a few minutes of one AM when the enemy's fire was completely silenced, and he was again sheering off.

It was at this moment that I considered him as my prize, and was trimming in the best manner I could, my much shattered sails; when I found my main mast was totally unsupported by rigging, every shroud being shot away, and some of them in several places, that even stoppers were useless, and could not be supplied with effect. I then gave orders to the officers to send the men up from the gun deck, to endeavour to secure it, in order that we might go

alongside of the enemy again as soon as possible; but every effort was in vain, for the mainmast went over the side in a few minutes after, and was carried with it the top-men, among whom was an amiable young gentleman, who commanded the main-top, Mr. James Jervis, son of James Jervis, Esq. of New York. It seems this young gentleman was apprised of the mast going, in a few minutes, by an old seaman; but he had already so much of the principle of an officer ingrafted on his mind, not to leave his quarters on any account, that, he told the man if the mast went they must go with it, which was the case, and only one of them was saved.

I regret much his loss, as a promising young officer, and amiable young man, as well as on account of a long intimacy that has subsisted between his farther and myself; but have great satisfaction in finding that I have lost no other, and only two or three slightly wounded, out of 39 killed and wounded: 14 of the former, and 25 of the latter.

As soon as the main-mast went, every effort was made to clear the wreck from the ship as soon as possible, which was effected in about an hour. It being impossible to pursue the enemy, and as her security was then the great object, I immediately bore away for Jamacia, for repairs, &c. finding it impossible to reach a friendly port in any of the islands to windward.

I should be wanting in common justice, was I to omit to journalize the steady attention to order, and the great exertion and bravery of all my officers, seamen and marines, in this action, amny of whom I had sufficiently tried before on a similar occasion, and all their names are recorded in the muster-roll I sent to the Secretary of the Navy, dated the 19th of December last, signed by myself.

All hands are employed in repairing the damage sustained in the action, so far as to get the ship into Jamaica as soon as possible.