

“The Knight and Mother Hen” - Suffren and Hughes and the Naval Campaign for India

By David Manley

Between February 1782 and June 1783 the fleets of French captain Pierre Andre de Suffren de St. Tropez and British Vice-Admiral Sir Edward Hughes fought a series of naval actions along the Indian Coromandel coast in what has become one of the most popular campaign settings for wargamers of the age of sail. Five actions, all largely inconclusive and fought between fleets that were relatively equal in numbers, were fought on the Coromandel Coast, at Sadras, Providien, Cuddalore, Negapatam and Trincomalee.

Historical Narrative

The Indian campaign arose as a result of the French involvement in the American War of Independence. French naval power had already compromised the British position in North America. The defeat of Cornwallis, brought about by the inability of the Royal Navy to defeat the French fleet under de Grasse at Chesapeake Bay, would lead to the eventual defeat of the British and independence for the United States. This state of affairs had generally been reached by late 1781. However, in the age of sail, a war in one corner of the globe would invariably lead to the opening of hostilities far beyond the original flashpoint, and which could continue on for several months after the original conflict had been resolved. As well as naval operations on the North American coast and in the North Atlantic (in support of the forces fighting in the Colonies) the war at sea raged locally in the Caribbean and, more farther afield, in India where the fleets of Suffren and Hughes acted in support of land forces fighting for control of the lucrative British, French and Dutch colonies in India and Ceylon.

The Coromandel Coast was the scene of one of the most fascinating and self-contained naval campaigns of the age of sail. The late 1700s saw the start of the great expansion of British power in India. The French were naturally opposed to this as were (even more naturally) many local Indian rulers. The French declaration of war against Britain in 1778 and the resulting opening of hostilities in India led swiftly to the British capture of the French colony of Pondicherry in October 17th. The principal local adversary of the British, Hyder Ali, (who had been defeated in earlier campaigns against the British and the Honourable East India Company) sided with the French and reopened hostilities against the British in 1780 (interestingly one of his reasons was the lack of British support for his own war being fought against the Maharattas). Battles for control of key ports raged from 1780. As could be expected from a war fought for control of trade and harbours, control of the sea was vital. The French Navy had a squadron under the command of Admiral Thomas d'Orves stationed at the Île de France. D'Orves was ordered to engage and destroy British warships in the area of the Coromandel coast, and to sweep the seas of British merchant vessels. D'Orves mounted only one expedition against the coast, at a time when the British fleet was on the opposite side of the country in Bombay. Moreover, d'Orves sortie alerted civilian shipping to the potential threat, resulting in a concentration of traders and East Indiamen under the protective guns of Madras. Unwilling to try to force a passage past the batteries, d'Orves withdrew. Worse still, d'Orves failed to support the army of Hyder Ali in its siege of Sir Eyre Coote's force in Cuddalore, antagonising France's only effective ally in India. Thus the ships of the Royal Navy and of the HEIC sailed effectively without opposition for some time, and it was only between February 1782 and June 1783 that British naval control was seriously contested. Coupled with this was the race to occupy Dutch held ports in Ceylon (in particular Trincomalee, which offered an anchorage sheltered from the monsoons), following the outbreak of hostilities between Britain and the Netherlands.

The British squadron in Indian waters was commanded by Vice-Admiral Sir Edward Hughes (known to his men as "Mother Hen", in view of his portly "hen like" stature and affable nature!). The French naval force supporting Hyder Ali was commanded for the most part by Captain Pierre Andre de Suffren de St. Tropez, often known as the Bailli du Suffren (as well as an officer in the French Navy he was also a Knight of Malta). Suffren had sailed from Brest in March 1781. Suffren commanded a fleet of 12 vessels including his flagship *Héros* (74). His orders from Minister of the Marine, de Castries, were to cause havoc amongst British interests in the Indies, ending the use of unrestricted seagoing transport along the Indian coastline, drawing the focus of the British away from North America, and supporting wider French interests in Indian and the East Indies.

Along the way he was also to act in support of the Dutch colony on the Cape of Good Hope. The British invasion convoy, escorted by a squadron under Commodore George Johnstone, was anchored at Porto Praya, in the neutral Portuguese Cape Verde islands. Suffren surprised Johnstone and, with little regard for Portuguese neutrality attacked immediately. However, the chance to score a glorious victory was squandered. In a pattern that was to be repeated several times over the coming months Suffren's efforts were poorly supported by his subordinates and he was forced to withdraw. However his bold action, and Johnstone's failure to effectively pursue the retreating French, was enough to gain him several days head start over the British, allowing him to reach the Cape colony on 21st June, land his troops and to help the Dutch secure the colony against British attack.

Having secured the Cape, Suffren cruised off the coast for two months before proceeding to join d'Orves at the Île de France (present day Martinique), which he reached on 25th October. There, he attempted to convince d'Orves of the

need to take immediate offensive action against the British along the coast of India and Ceylon. After a couple of months d'Orves took heed of his subordinate's urgings when, in January 1782, he took the combined squadron of 18 ships and several transports to sea to transport over three thousand soldiers, commanded by the Count du Chemin, to Pondicherry. On 22nd January Suffren captured the British *Hannibal* (50), which was brought into the French fleet at the *Petit Hannibal* (this to avoid confusion with the French ship of the line *Annibal*, which was already part of the combined squadron). Unfortunately for d'Orves this was to be the only time he was to see a French victory over the Royal Navy, for he died at sea on 9th February leaving command of the combined squadron to Suffren.

Meanwhile the British had been busy occupying French and Dutch holdings on the coasts of India and Ceylon. Admiral Hughes was in Ceylon where the British had, on January 5th, successfully taken the Dutch port of Trincomalee and its sheltered anchorage. Negapatam was also under threat from land forces, but Hyder Ali had marched on Pondicherry, besieging a small British force and taking the city. Arriving on the Indian coast, Suffren headed for Pondicherry to land Chein's troops and to confer with Hyder Ali. Hughes, then at Madras, learned of Suffren's arrival and, fearing that Suffren was intending to mount an assault on Trincomalee, ordered his squadron to sea. On February 16th Hughes made contact with the French transports off Sadras, capturing six ships. Suffren reacted by bearing down on the British ships and a lively action ensued, during which the rear of the British line was doubled and the *Exeter* heavily mauled. A change in the wind allowed the British van to join the action, but darkness brought an inconclusive end to the battle. Suffren anchored at Pondicherry, whilst Hughes continued on to refit at Trincomalee.

For the next two months Suffren remained near Pondicherry to reassure Hyder Ali as to continued support from France, and also to provide material support his siege of Cuddalore. At the end of March Suffren learnt that Hughes was to be reinforced by two ships of the line, *Sultan* (74) and *Magnanime* (64), both due to arrive from England. Suffren sailed South to attempt to intercept the newcomers, but Hughes had already effected a rendezvous with his reinforcements several days before. The two fleets met on April 9th, but Hughes was not in a hurry to join battle, continuing on towards Trincomalee. Battle was finally joined on the 12th. Suffren mounted a spirited attack on the British centre, his flagship engaging Hughes in the *Superb* at pistol shot range but again his efforts were largely unsupported by his captains. Again nightfall led to a conclusion of the action.

Suffren went on to the Dutch port of Bataco, further round the coast of Ceylon, then on to support Hyder Ali's consolidation of Cuddalore, which had fallen on April 4th. Meanwhile Hughes again refitted at Trincomalee, before carrying on to Negapatam, which had fallen to the British. Arriving at Negapatam on 4th July he learned that Suffren was only a few miles away. Hughes immediately sailed for Cuddalore, arriving at dawn the next day. Suffren immediately took his squadron to sea (apart from the *Ajax*, which had been damaged in a storm the previous day). A vigorous action ensued (what was to become known as the battle of Negapatam), in which a change in the wind caught a number of ships out of position and stuck between the main lines of the fleet. In the confused close quarter battle that followed the French *Severe* struck to the *Sultan*, but was saved by the arrival of the *Heros* – as the French flagship and the rest of Suffren's squadron closed the *Sultan* drew off, and *Severe* rehoisted her colours. At the same time the *Brillant* was mauled and in danger of being taken, but again the timely arrival of Suffren in support of his beleaguered ships saved them. Once again the action ended inconclusive, although this time the French had come off worse in terms of damage and casualties.

Suffren returned to Cuddalore, then sailed for Pointe de Galle to cover the arrival of a troop convoy and reinforcements of his own. Reinforced with both new ships and troops, Suffren launched his master stroke, attacking the vital port of Trincomalee on August 25th. After six days of combined land and sea operations the French took possession of the former Dutch colony. In the meantime Hughes had been refitting at Madras, but was made aware of the possibility of a French move on Ceylon in late August. He sailed on the 20th, but arrived there on September 2nd, to see the unwelcome sight of the French flag flying over the port, and Suffren's squadron in attendance. By this time Suffren had re-embarked his men and was preparing to return to the mainland. Suffren sailed on the 3rd and almost immediately battle was joined. Hughes sought to draw the French away from Trincomalee, which was generally successful. For his part, Suffren was keen to get into action, but handling problems amongst the ships of the French squadron left him frustrated so that when an opportunity to close presented itself the French were out of formation and unprepared, whilst the British line was steady. Again only a part of both fleets were fully engaged, and in the ensuing action the Suffren's flagship *Heros* and the *Illustre* were heavily mauled, whilst the British *Exeter* was forced to quit the line. Once again a change in the wind combined with nightfall ended the action before a conclusion could be reached. Having lost Trincomalee, Hughes returned to Madras for repairs. Suffren returned to Trincomalee, but here on September 9th he was to suffer his first serious loss, as the *Orient* (74) ran aground and was lost.

Shortly thereafter the monsoon season broke. Hughes quit Madras for the shelter of Bombay. Suffren was unable to stay at Trincomalee due to a lack of supplies, so he also decided to quit the theatre of operations and winter at Acheen in Dutch Sumatra. His voyage to Acheen included a stopover at Cuddalore where, again, disaster struck as the *Bizarre* (64) grounded and sank. In two months Suffren had lost two vital ships to careless accidents. Suffren returned to Trincomalee in February 1783, where he was joined by three new ships from France and a troop convoy, which was escorted to Cuddalore. Hughes returned from Bombay the following month, having also been reinforced. The balance of numbers was now in Hughes' favour, with 18 British ships of the line (one, the *Gibraltar*, an 80) facing 15 French. The

political situation had also shifted for, on December 7th 1782, Hyder Ali died although his son, the Tipu Sultan, continued the war against the British

On land the British sought to capitalise on the confusion in the aftermath of Hyder Ali's death. General Stuart mounting an attack from Madras on Cuddalore, which was put under siege. Progress was slow and the complete investment of the town was not completed until June. Hughes effected a blockade of the port. Suffren remained at Trincomalee, having been advised by Bussy to remain there until absolutely necessary. The call for action was received on June 10th and 3 days later Suffren arrived off Cuddalore. Poor winds kept the two fleets apart for two days, whilst another two days were spent with the fleets jockeying for position. Action was finally joined at 4pm on June 20th. As was becoming habitual on the Indian coast the arrival of night drew an end to an inconclusive battle. Damage combined with an outbreak of scurvy and a lack of water forced Hughes to withdraw to Madras, whilst Suffren returned to Cuddalore. This effectively ended the threat to Cuddalore for, without the presence of Hughes' squadron the supply ships supporting the land offensive also had to withdraw. The battle of Cuddalore was the last naval engagement of the war. On 29 June 1783, the British frigate *Medea* brought the news of the peace between France and Britain that was ratified at Versailles on 9th February 1783.

Conclusion

In two and a half years of campaigning, Suffren and Hughes both failed to win a decisive victory over their opponent. However, in fighting only inconclusive actions Suffren managed to maintain the initiative over Hughes – to succeed Suffren was often able to live with a draw whilst Hughes required a victory to regain the strategic imperative. Victory for Hughes at Sadras would have had a disastrous effect on French support for Hyder Ali; victory at Trincomalee could have won that port back from the French, whilst the defeat or withdrawal of the French at Cuddalore would have allowed Stuart's siege to succeed.

The main obstacle to Suffren's achievement of victory (apart from the British) was the lack of discipline amongst his subordinates. On several occasions his bold actions were left hanging in the wind as his supporting ships failed to engage. This was to some extent a by-product of the poor Bourbon naval administration which prevailed during the 18th century. To his credit Suffren took the bull by the horns and, by the end of the campaign, had succeeded in replacing six of the worst offending captains of his squadron. It is true to say that as the campaign ended Suffren had, through dogged determination and an unbounded personal strength, succeeded in moulding the best disciplined French fleet to put to sea since the 1750s. It was fortunate for Hughes that he was unable to achieve this earlier in the campaign!

From the wider French perspective, although Suffren's campaign did little to affect the overall strategic position in India, his inspired campaign, often against the odds and generally without much in the way of base port support was enough to save the French presence in India from total defeat, and did much to salvage the reputation and morale of the French Navy, which had suffered considerably as a result of numerous naval disasters during the reign of Louis XV. Suffren quite rightly earned a place and reputation as one of France's greatest admirals, but arguably this was because his contemporaries were so poor – it is rare indeed to win such an esteemed position on the strength of not having lost rather than achieving a notable victory. Nevertheless, Suffren enjoyed the praise of his colleagues and former enemies alike until his death in 1788. Indeed, several years later Napoleon lamented "Oh why didn't this man live longer? I would have had my own Nelson!" High praise indeed.

The Campaign

The aim of the campaign is to control the majority of specific ports and cities on the coasts of India and Ceylon when the campaign ends. The campaign continues until word of the peace settlement between France and Britain reaches the campaign area. Unfortunately the players do not know exactly when this will be (which could make planning in the final stages somewhat tricky!).

The campaign is presented for use with A&AGE's "Form Line of Battle", although it should be easily adaptable for use with any other set of age-of-sail rules.

Each campaign turn covers a period of 1 month. The campaign starts in February 1782. The end of the campaign is uncertain. Roll a d6 at the start of each month from April 1783. The table below indicates the score required for the campaign to end:

| Month | Die Roll (d6) |
|-----------|--------------------|
| April | 6 |
| May | 5,6 |
| June | 4,5,6 |
| July | 3,4,5,6 |
| August | 2,3,4,5,6 |
| September | Automatically ends |

The campaign may also end as a result of “sudden death” (see below)

Locations

The campaign area is made up of a number of Locations. Each Location represents a port or other geographical area plus its associated surrounding area of sea. The distances between Locations combined with the length of the campaign turn means that ships can move from their starting Location to any other Location. There are 12 Locations in the campaign. Locations are divided into three classes:

- a) Safe Locations – These Locations are heavily fortified ports and cities, or locations away from the main area of interest for the campaign. They may not be entered by enemy vessels and will always be controlled by the country that controls them at the start of the campaign. Safe Locations are as follows:

British: Madras, Bombay

French: Acheen, Ganjam

- b) Geographical Locations – the only geographical location is Pointe de Galle. This represents an arrival point for convoys arriving from Europe and cannot be controlled by either player.

- c) Contested Locations - The remaining seven Locations begin the campaign under the control of the British or French (or their Indian or Dutch allies) but may be captured during the course of the campaign. The winner at the end of the campaign is the player who controls the majority of the Contested Locations. The seven Locations are as follows (including their controlling player at the start of the campaign):

British: Trincomalee, Cuddalore, Negapatam, Porto Novo

French: Pondicherry, Bataco, Tranquebar

The Campaign Turn

Each turn run through the following turn sequence:

1. Roll for Campaign End (April 1783 onwards)
2. Assign ships to Patrol
3. Assign ships to Missions
4. Assign ships to Refit and Repair
5. Roll for Random Events (French player only)
6. Roll for Intelligence
7. Patrolling ships may intercept enemy Missions
8. Resolve battles
9. Determine effects of battles on ports
10. Check for “Sudden Death”
11. Determine effects of repairs.

The Monsoon Season

The monsoon season lasts from December until February. All ships must retire to port for these three months. Repairs may be undertaken during the monsoon season.

Patrolling, Missions and Intelligence

Ships can be assigned to Patrol, Missions or to Repair. Ships that are assigned to Missions will move from their starting location to any other location, generally for the purposes of attempting to capture an enemy port, or to escort a convoy. Ships that are Patrolling are assigned to a particular Location to protect it from enemy attack. As such it can be looked upon as another type of Mission, with the exception that patrolling ships can react to news of enemy missions. Once ships have been assigned to Missions, patrolling or Repair, both players announce what ships have been assigned to patrols and missions. Once this has been done each player rolls a d6. On a roll of 2+ they may send ships that have been assigned to Patrol to intercept enemy ships conducting Missions. For example, the French player announces that they are sending ships to Negapatam, whilst the British player has his fleet patrolling Cuddalore. On a roll of 2+ the patrolling British ships may be sent to Negapatam to engage the French.

Random Events

Suffren was beset with problems amongst his subordinates, occasionally with disastrous results. The French player rolls 2d6. On a roll of 11 or 12 (during turns in 1782) or 12 (during turns in 1783) one of his ships has suffered a catastrophic accident. Select the ship at random from all those available, excluding the flagship. The selected ship is considered destroyed. The French player can salvage all the crew parties from the lost ship.

Resolving Battles

Battles should be resolved using your preferred tactical rules. Despite the tying of Locations to named ports the majority of the actions fought during the real campaign were fought clear of land; tactical battles fought out in this campaign should generally be fought in open ocean (although you could add a coastline for added “spice”). All battles are fought to a conclusion, defined as all the ships on one side having struck or disengaged (beyond 125% enemy gunnery range), or when one player announces that they are seeking to disengage their fleet and their opponent is happy for them to do so.

Capturing a Contested Location

Contested Locations are vulnerable to capture if enemy ships occupy them at the end of a turn. In general, if a Contested Location is occupied by enemy ships at the end of a turn roll a d6 and add the number of enemy ships present. If the result is 10 or more the Location is captured. There are a couple of exceptions to this general rule

- a) a die roll of “1” (or double “1” if two dice are thrown – see below) is always a failure
- b) Cuddalore is a well-defended city – a score of 15 or more is required to capture it.

“Sudden Death”

The campaign automatically ends if one player occupies all the Contested Locations at the end of a turn.

Repairs

Ships damaged in action may be assigned to Repair. They are sent to a Location (generally a Safe Location) for the duration of the repairs. Ships that are repairing in a Contested Location that is captured by the enemy are also captured. The following repairs may be completed each turn:

All mast damage, along with other “specific” damage (e.g. damaged steering)

Hull and Gunnery damage up to 25% of the ships original value (rounded down)

For example, under “Form Line of Battle” a 74 gun ship has original values for Hull and Broadside ratings of 10 each, so 2 rating reductions can be repaired each month, along with all damaged masts.

In addition, 75% of lost crew units can be replaced whilst a ship is under repair.

Struck Ships

Ships that strike during a battle may be captured by the enemy and brought into their service. In order to take on a struck enemy ship the ship must spend at least one month undergoing repairs. Two crew units are required to provide the bare minimum crew to operate the ship. These two plus any additional crew units may be assigned to the ship from amongst those crew units currently assigned to other friendly ships.

Convoys

The French receive two troops convoys during the game. The first arrives in August 1782, the second in March 1783. Both convoys arrive at the Pointe de Galle. For the purposes of the campaign each convoy consists of 6 transports. The convoy is successfully escorted if, at the end of the campaign turn on which it arrives, it has lost no more than 2 ships to the enemy. If the convoy is not escorted and any enemy ships are sent to intercept it all the transports are lost.

If a convoy is successfully escorted this allows a bonus in an attack in the following campaign turn. If any port attacks are made the attacker may throw an extra die. For example, in the turn after a convoy has been successfully escorted an attack is made on Negapatam. The attackers have 4 ships present. A 4 is rolled for the attack, plus 4 for the ships for a

total of 8. This would normally be a failure, but an additional die is rolled, scoring a 3, bringing the total up to 11 – Negapatam is successfully captured.

Command and Crew Quality

Suffren is an Inspired commander, whilst Hughes is Average. All British ships are treated as having Veteran crews. All French ships are treated as having Experienced crews, except for command and control (treat as Poor throughout the campaign) and gunnery (treat as Poor in each ship's first action – note this does not apply to reinforcements).

Starting Forces

Each side starts with the following ships:

| British | French |
|--|--|
| Superb (74) Hero (74) Eagle (64) Monmouth (64) Worcester (64) Burford (64) Isis (50) Exeter (64) Monarca (68) | Heros (74) Orient (74) Hannibal (74) Sphinx (64) Brillant (64) Severe (64) Bizarre (64) Artesien (64) Vengeur (64) Flammand (56) Petit Hannibal (50) |
| <i>Seahorse (24)</i> <i>Manilla (14)</i> <i>Combustion (14)</i> <i>Juno (28)</i> <i>Medea (28)</i> <i>NB: Frigates and smaller craft have been included here for completeness, but do not take any active part in the campaign.</i> | <i>Pourvoyeuse (38)</i> <i>Fine (32)</i> <i>Bellone (32)</i> <i>Subtile (22)</i> <i>Sylphide (16)</i> <i>Diligent (10)</i> <i>Apolon (40)</i> <i>Cleopatre (36)</i> <i>Coventry (28)</i> |

The following reinforcements arrive in the specified months:

| | British | French |
|------------------|--|--|
| 1782 | | |
| April | Sultan (74) | - |
| May | - | Ajax (64) |
| August | - | Troop Convoy Illustre (74) St Michael (64) |
| September | Magnanime (64) Sceptre (64) | Consolante (50) |
| 1783 | | |
| January | - | Argonaute (74) |
| February | Cumberland (74) Gibraltar (80) | Troop Convoy |
| March | - | Fendant (74) |
| April | Defence (74) Africa (64) Bristol (50) Inflexible (64) | Hardi (64) |

“One Off” Battles

For those wishing to fight the five actions between Suffren and Hughes as one offs, the following tables list the ships involved on each side.

Sadras, February 17th 1782

| British | French |
|---|---|
| Superb (74) Hero (74) Eagle (64) Monmouth (64) Worcester (64) Burford (64) Isis (50) Exeter (64) Monarca (68) | Heros (74) Orient (74) Hannibal (74) Sphinx (64) Brillant (64) Severe (64) Bizarre (64) Artesien (64) Vengeur (64) Flammand (56) Petit Hannibal (50) Ajax (64) |

Providien, April 12th 1782

| British | French |
|--|---|
| Superb (74) Hero (74) Eagle (64) Monmouth (64) Worcester (64) Burford (64) Isis (50) Exeter (64) Monarca (68) Sultan (74) Magnanime (64) | Heros (74) Orient (74) Hannibal (74) Sphinx (64) Brillant (64) Severe (64) Bizarre (64) Artesien (64) Vengeur (64) Flammand (56) Petit Hannibal (50) Ajax (64) |

Negapatam, July 6th 1782

| British | French |
|--|--|
| Superb (74) Hero (74) Eagle (64) Monmouth (64) Worcester (64) Burford (64) Isis (50) Exeter (64) Monarca (68) Sultan (74) Magnanime (64) | Heros (74) Orient (74) Hannibal (74) Sphinx (64) Brillant (64) Severe (64) Bizarre (64) Artesien (64) Vengeur (64) Flammand (56) Petit Hannibal (50) |

Trincomalee, September 3rd, 1782

| British | French |
|--|--|
| Superb (74) Hero (74) Eagle (64) Monmouth (64) Worcester (64) Burford (64) Isis (50) Exeter (64) Monarca (68) Sultan (74) Magnanime (64) Sceptre (64) | Heros (74) Orient (74) Hannibal (74) Sphinx (64) Brillant (64) Severe (64) Bizarre (64) Artesien (64) Vengeur (64) Flammand (56) Petit Hannibal (50) Ajax (64) Illustre (74) St Michael (64) Consolante (50) |

Cuddalore, June 20th 1783

| British | French |
|---|--|
| Superb (74) Hero (74) Eagle (64) Monmouth (64) Worcester (64) Burford (64) Isis (50) Exeter (64) Monarca (68) Sultan (74) Magnanime (64) Sceptre (64) Cumberland (74) Gibraltar (80) Defence (74) Africa (64) Bristol (50) Inflexible (64) | Heros (74) Hannibal (74) Sphinx (64) Brillant (64) Severe (64) Artesien (64) Vengeur (64) Flammand (56) Petit Hannibal (50) Ajax (64) Illustre (74) St Michael (64) Argonaute (74) Fendant (74) Hardi (64) |

