

## **The Siege of Cuddalore (1783) – A Historical Study**

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The Siege of Cuddalore was a siege attempt by British troops against a combined French and Mysorean garrison in the fortress of Cuddalore late in the War of American Independence and the Second Anglo-Mysore War. The siege was ended by the preliminary peace between France and Britain. There was a battle between a British fleet under Admiral Sir Edward Hughes and a slightly smaller French fleet under the Bailli de Suffren off the coast near Cuddalore during the American War of Independence, which in 1780 had sparked the Second Mysore War in India. The battle took place on 20 June 1783, after peace had been signed in Europe but before the news had reached India. It was the final battle of the American War of Independence.

### **Background**

Following the death of French ally Hyder Ali, the ruler of Mysore, in December 1782, British commanders at Madras decided to attempt the recapture of Cuddalore, which Hyder Ali had captured in April of that year. The army marched south from Madras, and, circling around the city, encamped to its south. The British fleet, the 18 ships of the line under Admiral Sir Edward Hughes, anchored advantageously to the south of Cuddalore in order to protect the army and its supply ships. By early June 1783 the siege was under way.<sup>1</sup>

### **Commencement of the Siege**

British troops under the command of James Stuart arrived outside Cuddalore on 7 June 1783. This army consisted of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 78<sup>th</sup> Highlanders, and the 101<sup>st</sup> regiment, with a considerable body of Sepoys, and was subsequently reinforced by a detachment of two regiments of hired Hanoverian (German troops) under Colonel Christoph August von Wangenheim. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, the army took up a position on sandy ground two miles distant from the garrison, with its right on the sea, and the left resting on the Bandipollum hills, having a second line in reserve in the rear. The French and Mysoreans, commanded by Marquis de Bussy-Castelnau took up an intermediate position, nearly parallel and half a mile (0.8 km) in front of the fort.<sup>2</sup>

**Attack on the Redout**

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of June Stuart decided to attack the redout in front of the fort in order to press the allies harder within Cuddalore itself and to be more fully prepared for siege operations. The assault took place at four in the morning to gain the element of surprise but attacks and counterattacks by both sides kept on going until five in the evening. Eventually the allies were driven from their principal defences on their right and the last allied counterattack was defeated. By mutual consent a cessation of firing took place as casualties were enormous. The allies had suffered serious losses of nearly 500 casualties men of which they could ill afford, and they lost thirteen of their guns. Stuart's forces too had suffered heavily: over 900 British, Hanoverian and their sepoys were killed or wounded, significantly weakening the force for the siege. However Stuart now in his wanted position made no hesitation in laying siege to Cuddalore proper and in addition prepared for further reinforcements from the sea.<sup>3</sup>

French Admiral the Bailli de Suffren was ordered on 10 June to sail with his inferior fleet of 15 ships from Trincomalee in support of the besieged city. The French fleet under Suffren appeared off the port on 13 June. Seeking to avoid battle, it moved away from the city and again anchored. After five days of adverse winds, Suffren was able to anchor near the city, where he made contact with the city's commander Sayed Sahib of Mysore. Since it appeared that the success of the siege would be decided by naval action, 1,200 troops were embarked onto Suffren's ships to increase his gunnery complement. His fleet weighed anchor on 18 June, and the two fleets began maneuvering for advantage.<sup>4</sup>

**Battle**

A week of fickle winds prevented either side from engaging, but on 20 June Suffren attacked. No ships were seriously damaged, though casualties were high with both sides losing about 100 men dead and 400 wounded. The British fleet retreated to Madras after the action, preventing the landing of transports carrying additional troops to reinforce the siege. A sortie from the town weakened the British forces, which were likely to have raised the siege if word had not arrived on 29 June that a preliminary peace had been agreed between France and Britain.<sup>5</sup>

Both fleets were at first frustrated by light and changeable winds. When a consistent west wind appeared on 20 June, Hughes lined up for battle on a northward-trending port tack and awaited Suffren's action. Lining up in a similar formation, Suffren gave the order to attack, and battle was engaged shortly after 4 pm. The action lasted until about 7 pm, and there was no major damage done to ships in either fleet, even though all ships were engaged.<sup>6</sup>

**Aftermath**

Suffren's fleet anchored about 25 miles north of Cuddalore after the battle, while Hughes anchored near the city. On 22 June he sighted the French fleet there while he was en route back to Madras. A number of his ships had been disabled, and he reported that many men were suffering from scurvy and that he was short of water.<sup>7</sup>

Suffren returned to Cuddalore on 23 June, forcing the British supply fleet to withdraw. In addition to returning the 1,200 troops he had borrowed from the city's

garrison, he landed an additional 2,400 men to support the defense.<sup>8</sup> A sortie from the city was repelled but weakened the besieging British, and on 29 June a British ship flying under a truce flag brought news of a preliminary peace agreement between the two nations, resulting in a mutually-agreed suspension of hostilities on July 2. A cessation of hostilities, complicated by the fact that Mysore and Britain were still at war, was negotiated on 2 July. In the Peace of Paris (1783) Cuddalore was returned to Great Britain in exchange for Pondicherry and Mahé, two French territories that Great Britain had captured earlier in the war. Fighting continued between the British and Mysoreans until the Treaty of Mangalore was signed in March 1784.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes and References

- [1] Michael Sanderson, *Sea battles: a reference guide*, (London: David and Charles, 1975), p.150.
- [2] Robert Dodsley, *The Annual Register, Or a View of the History, Politics and Literature of the Year*, (London: Dodsley, 1799), p.3.
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- [4] Lincoln P. Paine, *Warships of the World to 1900*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), p.74.
- [5] Kaushik Roy, *War, Culture and Society in Early Modern South Asia, 1740-1849*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011), p.16.
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- [8] Jean Sutton, *The East India Company's Maritime Service, 1746-1834: Masters of the Eastern Seas*, (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), p.147.
- [9] William Stewart, *Admirals of the World: A Biographical Dictionary, 1500 to the Present*, (London: McFarland, 2009), p.99.

