

Battle of the Virginia Capes

In late August of 1781, the French fleet under Admiral Francois Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse arrived at the Chesapeake Bay with some 3,200 reinforcements. These troops supplemented the French forces of General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau that had joined up with General George Washington's Continental Army in the Hudson River Valley and were slowly marching toward Virginia. French ships of the line anchored in the Lynnhaven Bay while shallower draft vessels moved troops and siege cannon up the James River in what amounted to a grueling 120-mile round trip. While taxing on the boat crews it was necessary to build the Patriot's combat power to counter British General Charles Cornwallis, who had established a position at Yorktown on the York River.

While the movement was in progress, a British Fleet under Admiral Thomas Graves departed New York to bring needed reinforcements and supplies to Cornwallis. Graves was unaware of the French presence in the Chesapeake Bay. On the morning of September 5, 1781, a French frigate patrolling the entrance to the bay spotted the British fleet. The frigate signaled de Grasse, who then ordered his fleet underway, foregoing predetermined fighting positions. Departing in "order of speed" meant lining up as quickly as possible into an ad hoc fighting formation.

The French were at several disadvantages. The ships fought a flood or incoming tide leaving the bay. Many boats and crews were still engaged in landing operations, so the reduced manning resulted in fewer guns. It also took time to weigh anchor, set sail, and maneuver. Instead, most of the ships cut their anchor cables and marked them with buoys for easier retrieval before setting sail.

The disordered departure of the French resulted in difficulty forming a fighting line. This meant only those ships at the head of the line engaged the British fleet at the beginning of the battle. With significant distance between the French ships, a deliberate British maneuver could have cut them off from the main line and left individual ships unsupported. However, effective positioning in the wind enabled the French to utilize their lower gun ports and deliver more rounds with each broadside. Conflicting and confusing signals from Admiral Graves resulted in some British ships failing to close, missing an opportunity to engage the French vessels. Like the earlier Battle of Cape Henry, the British received the worst of the damage, eventually returning to New York for repairs. With the French navy in control of the Chesapeake Bay, Gen. Washington was free to maneuver his troops without opposition.