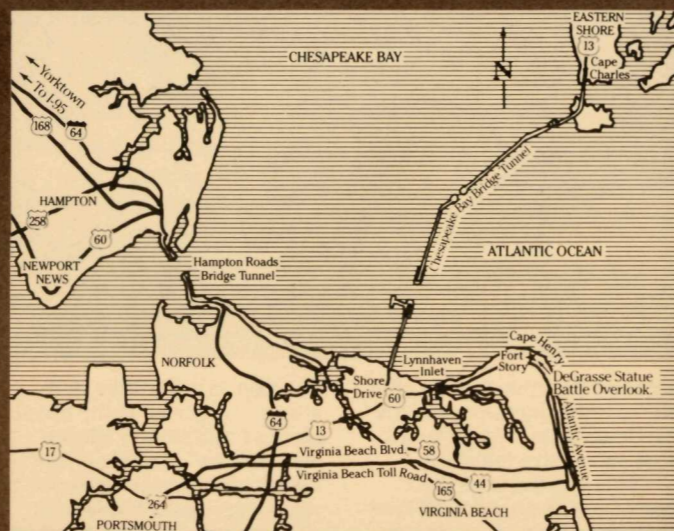




Statue of Admiral Francois Joseph Paul Comte de Grasse erected at Cape Henry to commemorate the Battle Off the Capes.

The Battle off the Capes

Cape Henry, Virginia,
September 5, 1781



From the southern exit of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel (Route 13) turn left (east) on route 60 (Shore Drive) to The Virginia Beach resort area – enter Fort Story.

From I-64 take route 60 (east to Fort Story).

From Route 44 (Virginia Beach-Norfolk Expressway) or route 58 (Virginia Beach Boulevard) turn left (north) on Atlantic Ave. to the 89th street entrance to Fort Story.

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The Battle off the Capes

Cape Henry, Virginia,
September 5, 1781



On September 5, 1781, off the shores of Cape Henry, a French fleet commanded by Admiral Francois Joseph Paul Comte de Grasse defeated a British fleet commanded by Admiral Thomas Graves. Though inadequately recognized or understood by historians, this Revolutionary War sea battle and its forgotten hero, Admiral de Grasse, played a tremendous role in America's struggle for independence.

General Cornwallis was deeply entrenched and strongly fortified at Yorktown in the summer of 1781, awaiting the arrival of the British fleet with crucial reinforcements and supplies. Instead, however, he suddenly found himself surrounded on the land side by the Franco-American armies of Washington, Rochambeau and Lafayette, and all escape routes by sea blockaded by the fleet of Admiral de Grasse. The result, of course, was the surrender of Cornwallis to Washington October 19, 1781.

“The most curious and perhaps the most crucial battle of the Revolution occurred on September 5, 1781. It was curious in that it involved the British and the French, but no Americans, and in that it produced no victor while virtually assuring Britons ultimate defeat in the war. It was crucial in that it gave the Americans control over the Chesapeake, cutting Cornwallis off from aid or escape by sea, and giving the allies time to bring up their heavy siege guns.”

Battle of Yorktown by Thomas J. Fleming

Admiral de Grasse had twenty-eight magnificent vessels.



Commander in Chief George Washington met Admiral DeGrasse off Cape Henry, Virginia to plan the siege of Yorktown.



On October 19, 1781 Cornwallis surrendered.



On Both sides several hundred men were wounded or killed.

From the span of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel the motorist has a sweeping view of the great Chesapeake as it flows between the shorelines of Cape Henry to the south and Cape Charles to the north before it integrates, sometimes turbulently, with the persistent tides of the Atlantic Ocean along the eastern horizon.

Within this sweeping view one is almost guaranteed the sight of a black-hulled pilot boat from which arriving cargo ships take aboard the professional harbor pilots that guide them through the tricky waters of Hampton Roads.

And there are usually large numbers of these gigantic cargo vessels to be seen, patiently anchored awaiting their turn at the harbor's famous loading piers.

On a breezy day the bay is generously sprinkled with the white, sometimes multi-colored, sails of assorted sized craft as they maneuver before the wind.

This battle was the most perfectly executed naval campaign of the age of the sail."

The French Navy and American Independence by Jonathan Dull

And when the fishing is

good, which is most of the time, fleets of small boats greedily vie for the advantage, pushing and shoving, engines quarreling, like too many naughty children grappling for a favorite toy.

The Chesapeake Bay is at all times a panorama of sights and sounds and smells, as crucially vital today to America's economy as it was two centuries ago to the winning of America's independence.

It is a sometimes overlooked historical fact that a sea battle fought here, just outside the Chesapeake Capes, two hundred years ago brought about the downfall of England's General Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, making way for the end of the Revolutionary War and the beginning of America's independence.

The year was 1781. The Thirteen Colonies, which had in 1776 declared themselves the United States of America, had been in revolt for six years, struggling to gain freedom from the domination of England. France had signed an alliance with America three years earlier and French troops had since joined in the efforts to drive out the English.

Despite the alliance, how-

ever, the situation had grown increasingly worse and things were particularly grim in the early months of 1781.

"The Battle of Chesapeake was one of the decisive battles of the world. Before it, the creation of the United States was possible; after it, it was certain."

The History of the British Navy by Michael Lewis

The British, with their strong Royal Navy, already occupied such important ports as New York (seat of the British administration), Philadelphia, Charleston and Savannah. They were, in fact, able to blockade and patrol the entire coastline.

Both America's Commander-in-Chief, General George Washington, and the French Marshal, General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeure Comte de Rochambeau, had long pleaded with France for more naval assistance but as of June 1781 neither knew when, or if, it would come.

In May the situation had become crucial when General Lord Cornwallis had invaded Virginia from North Carolina. The efforts of the Marquis de Lafayette and

General Anthony Wayne had done little to stop his progress. Lord Cornwallis moved about the state at will and by August had encamped his many thousands of men at Yorktown on the York River, which flows into Chesapeake Bay.

With Cornwallis entrenched so close to the Chesapeake he was assured delivery of the badly needed troops and supplies. What the British did not know, however, was that the major part of the French fleet, under the command of Admiral Francois Joseph Paul Comte de Grasse, was on its way to North America from the West Indies. General Rochambeau had learned of the deployment and had advised General Washington but he did not know where the fleet would strike or how many ships were involved.

Admiral de Grasse had 28 magnificent vessels under his command and it was his decision to put into Chesapeake Bay rather than New York. He arrived on August 30, 1781 and had the fleet anchor in the area extending from Cape Henry to about where the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel now connects the two shorelines.

What an awesome sight

that must have been...mile after mile of towering masts and the grandeur of the French Navy's most impressive tall ships.

This was the view that greeted the 19-ship British fleet when, upon word from its intelligence, it sailed from New York to the Chesapeake. Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves, commanding the North American Station, expected to find a small detachment of French ships. Instead he encountered the powerful squadron of de Grasse.

The English fleet arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake about mid-morning September 5, 1781, in open water and bearing down before the wind. Admiral Thomas Graves had both wind and surprise in his favor.

Admiral de Grasse and his French forces were caught off-guard. Many of his sailors were ashore on various duties when the British fleet was sighted. The crewmen were hastily recalled and preparations were made to get underway. Two hours elapsed. Then it took another two hours for the French ships to move single file through the Bay's narrow channel.

Admiral Graves waited. Historians reason that his

decision to wait rather than attack was based on the Royal Navy's traditional "Fighting Instructions" wherein it specifies proper formation as two opposing lines of battle with ship against ship slugging it out broadside to broadside.

It was about four in the afternoon by the time the French ships had cleared the Bay. Admiral Graves had brought his ships about but his signals were so confusing to his own captains that the proper formation was never completed.

Firing opened on both sides but because of the scattered formation the action never became general, according to historians. The lead ships, those within closest range, exchanged cannonades but others along the line were only partially engaged. Or not at all.

"The most curious and perhaps the most crucial battle of the Revolution occurred on September 5, 1781. It was curious in that it involved the British and the French, but no Americans, and in that it produced no victor while virtually assuring Britons ultimate defeat in the war. It was crucial in that it gave the Americans con-

trol over the Chesapeake, cutting Cornwallis off from aid or escape by sea, and giving the allies time to bring up their heavy siege guns."

Battle of Yorktown by Thomas J. Fleming

The battle continued until dark then both fleets drifted with tide and wind. On both sides several hundred men were wounded or killed but not one ship was taken or sunk, though some were severely damaged and one British ship later had to be burned.

For the next two days the fleets were becalmed and neither admiral made an aggressive move. Finally, Admiral de Grasse sailed the French fleet back into the Chesapeake Bay and Admiral Graves returned to New York, leaving Cornwallis and his Army stranded.

Lord Cornwallis was now lost. Cut off from support by sea, without reinforcements and supplies, he was unable to sustain the defense of Yorktown. On October 19, 1781 he surrendered over 7,000 men. And that was the beginning of the end of the American's War for Independence.

The Battle Off the Capes, which was really more a naval

skirmish than a battle but was monumental in its consequences, has received very little of the historical recognition it so rightly deserves.

In 1976 the Virginia Beach Bicentennial Commission, as one of its projects, brought attention to the significance of the Battle Off the Capes by erecting a statue of Admiral de Grasse and constructing an overlook from which visitors can view the Bay and the site of the battle.

Both the statue, which was a gift from France, and the massive cedar overlook are located at Fort Story, within sight of the Old Cape Henry Lighthouse and the First Landing Memorial Cross.

The view from the overlook is as impressive as that from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. From either spot a person can gaze out over the beautiful Chesapeake Bay and with just a little imagination see those great French warships wallowing against the tide, hear the thundering roar of the cannons as they belch fire and metal, and smell the acrid smoke as it billows from the gunports.

And, once again, it's September 5, 1781. And the Battle Off the Capes