

BATTLE OF QUIBERON BAY

A British Captain

20 November 1759

I most heartily congratulate you upon the great event of our defeating Marshal Conflans on the 20th instant. As the express is on the point of setting out, my relation of the victory cannot be particular. On the 14th of November Sir Edward Hawke hoisted his flag on board the ROYAL GEORGE in Torbay, where the fleet had put in a few days before through stress of weather. The same evening we stood out to sea, with 23 ships of the line, and two frigates; and on the 16th were within eight or ten leagues of the isle of Ushant.

In the afternoon we fell in with some English transports returning from Quiberon, who gave the admiral information, that they saw the French fleet the day before, consisting of 24 sail, standing to the SE and were at that time 23 leagues W. of Belleisle. The intelligence was received with universal acclamation, and every ship prepared for action. The admiral lost not a minute of time, but pursued with the utmost alertness. In the evening of the 18th the wind came on fresh from the westward, and we spread all our canvas to court the prosperous gale. On the 20th about half an hour after eight in the morning, the MAIDSTONE frigate let fly her top-gallant sails, which was a signal for discovering a fleet; at nine, not a doubt was left, of the happy hour being arrived which we had six months been impatiently expecting. We ascertained them to be the French squadron, of 21 sail of the line and three smaller ships; and that they were chasing Captain Duff's frigates and bombs; the destruction of which was one object of their destination. Upon their having a distincter view of our ships they gave over the chase, and appeared to be forming a line to receive us. From the equality of combatants, we concluded the action would be very great, and general; but I may venture to assert, there was not an Englishman from high to low, who did not assure himself of victory.

Upon our advancing, Marshal Conflans changed his plan, and put right before the wind towards the shore, seeking safety in his flight. At this critical time Sir Edward paid no regard to lines of battle, but every ship was directed to make the best of her way towards the enemy: the admiral told his officers he was for the old way of fighting, to make downright work with them. At noon our headmost ships were pretty near them, and between one and two, the WARSPITE and DORSETSHIRE began to fire, and were then abreast of the Cardinal rocks. Presently after the REVENGE, RESOLUTION, TORBAY, MAGNANIME, SWIFTSURE, MONTAGU, and DEFIANCE, came into action. The firing now became very alert on both sides, and there was no distinguishing any longer English colours from French. M. Du Vergen, the French rear-admiral, in the *FORMIDABLE*, bore a very fierce cannonade from the RESOLUTION; but upon the ROYAL GEORGE's coming up, they hauled down their flag and struck to Sir Edward Hawke. This was only a point of honour, the RESOLUTION having the merit of subduing them. The ROYAL GEORGE continued advancing, and Sir Edward gave orders to his master to carry him close alongside of M. Conflans in the *SOLEIL ROYAL*. The French admiral seem'd to have the same ambition on his part, and it was a glorious sight to behold the blue and the white flags both at the maintopmast head bearing down to each other. The ROYAL GEORGE passed the TORBAY which was closely engaged with the *THESEE* of 74 guns, and who soon afterwards sent that unfortunate ship to the bottom. On the other side was the MAGNANIME, who kept an incessant fire on one of the largest of the French ships, and in the end obliged her to strike. She afterwards ran ashore, and was burnt. The two commander-in-chiefs were now very near, and M. Conflans gave the English admiral his broadside; the ROYAL GEORGE returned the uncivil salutation, but after two or three discharges of this kind, the marshal of France declined the combat and sheered off. The French vice-admiral likewise gave Sir Edward his broadside, and soon followed the example of his superior. Another and another acted the same part; the fifth ship escaped not so well; Sir Edward poured his whole fire into her at once, and repeating the same, down she went along side of him. The ROYAL GEORGE's people gave a cheer, but it was a faint one; the honest sailors were touched at the miserable fate of so many hundreds of poor creatures. The blue flag was now encountered with seven ships at the same time, and appeared to be in the very centre of the French rear. Every observer pitied the ROYAL GEORGE, to see her singly engaged against so many of the enemy. It seems indeed a kind of degradation to so noble a ship to be pitied; but really her situation would have been lamentable, if the enemy had perserved any degree of composure, or fired with any sort of direction; but their confusion was so great, that of many hundreds of shot, I do not believe that more than 30 or 40 struck the ship. Sir Charles Hardy in the UNION, with the MARS, HERO, and several other ships were crowding to the admiral's assistance, when the retreat of the French, covered by the obscurity of the evening, put an end to the engagement. Happy circumstance for the enemy, as an hour's daylight more would have brought on their total ruin.

This battle was fought so near the coast of Brittany, that ten thousand persons upon the shore were the sad witnesses of the white flag's disgrace.

When I sat down to write, I intended to have given you only a general account, but upon such an animating occasion as this, there is no possibility of leaving off, whilst a margin remains unoccupied. We have burnt the *SOLEIL ROYAL* of 84 brass guns, M. Conflan's ship, together with the *HERO* of 74 guns; both of which ran shore near Crozie. We have sunk the *THESEE* of 74 guns and the *SUPERBE* of 70: we have driven off the *JUSTE* of 70 guns upon the rocks, where she overset; and have taken the *FORMIDABLE* of 80, the French rear-admiral 62 of whose guns are brass. Ten or eleven other ships were aground, but got off again, by throwing their guns and stores overboard. They are now crept into the entrance of the little river Villaine, where we do not despair of setting them on fire. Whether we succeed in this or not we have room to believe they have undergone so much damage, that few of them will be able to put to sea any more. The rest made their escape the night after the engagement, under the command of M. Beaufremont, their vice-admiral, and stretched away for Rochfort.

We have had the misfortune to lose the victorious *RESOLUTION* of 74 guns, and the *ESSEX* of 64; the former struck upon a sand called Le Four, the night after the battle; and next morning the *ESSEX* going down to her relief, unhappily ran upon the same shoal. Our endeavours to get them off were unsuccessful; but we have this consolation, that almost all their people were saved, and are embarked on board the *FORMIDABLE*. I should be esteemed a very unjust historian, if I neglected to make known to you, that Captain Dennis of the *DORSETSHIRE*, and Captain Speke of the *RESOLUTION*, have acquired immortal honour; the admiral told them, in the warmth of his gratitude, they had behaved like angels. I would in this place attempt the most honourable mention of Sir Edward Hawke; nor would I by any means omit Lord Howe, and Captain Keppel; neither should Captain Campbell pass unnoticed, but that there was a certain greatness in their behaviour which exceeds the ability of my pen to celebrate.... The glory of the British flag has been nobly supported, while that of the enemy is vanished into empty air.

The Gentleman's Magazine, (December 1759), p. 557.