

THE GLORIOUS FIRST OF JUNE

Captain Collingwood to his father

BARFLEUR, at Sea
5 June 1794

When the Admiral's despatches came away, I was unable, from fatigue and hurry, to write more than a few lines to my wife, to tell her that I was well; but as no doubt you will be desirous to know the particulars of our success, I will first give you the outlines of our cruise previously to the 1st of June, and then all the satisfaction I can as to the proceedings of that day. It is a narration full of incident, and I feel myself very unequal to describe a battle unlike any thing that perhaps ever happened before, for we had three days' hard fighting before we were crowned with victory, by the total defeat and flight of a fleet superior to our own, and sent out for the express purpose of destroying us. Well, then, after seeing the convoys down the Channel as far as the Lizard, and detaching Rear-admiral Montague, with six sail of the line, for their further protection, we stretched across the Channel to Brest, and sent in two frigates, covered by two ships of the line, to see what force was there; when they found the French fleet at anchor, and counted twenty-four sail of large ships. Unsettled weather, and the wind hanging to the north-eastward, set us to the southward, so that it was fourteen days before we got off Brest again, and then found that the enemy's fleet was gone. How the Admiral got his intelligence I do not know, but he did get a very exact account of their route; for we immediately made all the sail we could for 150 leagues to the westward, retaking about fifteen English merchant vessels, some Dutch, and a few French cruisers, in our way; all of which were immediately burnt, as it was impossible, under the circumstances in which we were, to spare a man, or to be encumbered with prizes. In that situation, we cruised for a few days, like disappointed people looking for what they could not find, until the morning of little Sarah's birth-day, between eight and nine o'clock, when the French fleet of twenty-five sail of the line, was discovered to windward. We chased them, and they bore down within about five miles of us. Admiral Paisley commanded the advanced squadron of four sail, viz. BELLEROPHON, RUSSELL, MARLBOROUGH, and THUNDERER. They were much nearer; and about three o'clock they began to exchange fire with the enemy's rear, which increased as they advanced, and continued very hot until nine at night, when the detached ships joined the fleet. On the 29th, the French fleet was to windward about three miles, and, as it shewed no disposition to come down, we tacked about six in the morning, in hopes our van would bring their rear to close action; but they only fetched within a long shot, which the French kept up pretty smartly. About eight, they wore, which again brought them in a line parallel to us, and their van continued a sharp cannonade on ours for two hours or more; when the Admiral, finding there was no chance of bringing them to close action but by a dash, made a signal for the van to tack, and the rest in succession to follow them; and we then led in amongst them in a very fine style. Admiral Gardner led the fleet, and suffered a good deal, but we cut up their rear effectually. They skillfully enough covered their disabled ships, and made an assault on ours (the QUEEN and INVINCIBLE); but Admiral Graves, in the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, and ourselves, stood between them, and had very smart work, for an hour and a half, with one of their first-rates, and two 74-gun ships, when they all bore away. On the 30th, we first saw them far to leeward, but it was foggy and bad weather, so thick that we could scarce see the length of the ship until the 31st, in the afternoon, when it cleared, and we observed the enemy to leeward forming their line. We bore down to them, and formed ours, which took us all the evening. The night was spent in watching and preparation for the succeeding day; and many a blessing did I send forth to my Sarah, lest I should never bless her more. At dawn, we made our approach on the enemy, then drew up, dressed our ranks, and it was about eight when the Admiral made the signal for each ship to engage her opponent, and bring her to close action, and then down we went under a crowd of sail, and in a manner that would have animated the coldest heart, and struck terror into the most intrepid enemy. The ship we were to engage was two a-head of the French Admiral, so that we had to go through his fire and that of two ships next him, and received all their broadsides two or three times before we fired a gun. It was then near ten o'clock. I observed to the Admiral, that about that time our wives were going to church, but that I thought the peal we should ring about the Frenchmen's ears would outdo their parish bells. Lord Howe began his fire sometime before we did; and he is not in the habit of firing soon. We got very near indeed, and then began such a fire as would have done you good to have heard. During the whole action the most exact order was preserved, and no accident happened but what was inevitable, and the consequence of the enemy's shot. In ten minutes the Admiral was wounded; I caught him in my arms before he fell: the First Lieutenant was slightly wounded by the same shot, and I thought I was in a fair way of being left on deck by myself; but the Lieutenant got his head dressed, and came up again. Soon after, they called from the fore-castle that the Frenchman was sinking; at which the men started up and gave three cheers. I saw the French ship dismasted, and on her broadside, but in an instant she was clouded with smoke, and I do not know whether she sunk or not. All the ships in our neighbourhood were dismasted, and are taken, except the French

Admiral, who was driven out of the line by Lord Howe, and saved himself by flight. At about twenty minutes past twelve, the fire slackened, the French fled, and left us seven of their fine ships—*SANS PAREIL*, 84; *JUSTE*, 84; *L'ACHILLE*, 74; *NORTHUMBERLAND*, 74; *L'AMERIQUE*, 80; and *LE VENGEUR*, 74, which last sunk the same evening; so that you see we have had as complete a victory as could be won. Our condition did not admit of a further pursuit; indeed, to take possession of what we had got required exertion. Two of our ships were totally dismasted, and many of us very much crippled. We left off in admirable good plight, having sustained less loss than could be expected, considering the fire we had so long on us. We had nine men killed, and twenty-two with severe wounds, a few others slightly hurt; our masts, &c. all in their places, though much wounded. We have not obtained this victory without losses that must long be lamented. Admiral Bowyer and Admiral Paisley have each lost a leg; Admiral Graves is severely wounded in the arm, and as he is seventy years of age, or nearly, it is hard to say what will be the consequence. Captain Montague was killed; and Captain Hutt, of the *QUEEN*, lost his leg. Several Lieutenants are killed and wounded; and this, altogether, has been the severest action that has been fought in our time, or perhaps ever. It did not last very severely much more than two hours, when ten of the enemy's ships were dismasted, and two of ours. They were superior to us in ships, men, and guns, sent out for the express purpose of destroying us. Four of their ships were provided with furnaces for red-hot shot, one of which stuck in the *ROYAL SOVEREIGN*, but I have not heard that they did any mischief in any part of the fleet by them. We understand their orders were to give no quarter; and, indeed, they fought as if they expected none.

June 13. We are just arrived at Spithead. A thousand blessings on you all.

G.L. Newham Collingwood, ed. *A Selection from the Private Correspondence of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood: Interspersed with Memoirs of his Life*. (London: 1828), I:25–31.