

Biographia navalis; or, Impartial memoirs of the lives and Character of officers of the Navy of Great Britain—Volume 5

By John Charnock – London 1797

[Page 240](#)

This first success, which he met with on the 29th of June, 1745, when on his passage from Portsmouth to Plymouth, appeared but as the prelude to that high renown he gained, on the 9th of the ensuing month, in an encounter with a French ship of the line; the particulars are officially related in the following manner.

“On Tuesday, the 9th of this month, his majesty’s ship the Lion, of fifty-eight guns, being in the latitude of 47.57 N. and W. from the meridian of the Lizard 39 leagues, captain Brett, her commander, saw two sail to leeward, to which he immediately bore down, and by three in the afternoon made them to be two of the enemy’s ships. By four o’clock he was within two miles of them: they then hoisted French colours and shortened sail. One of them was a man of war, of sixty-four guns; and the other a ship of sixteen guns. At five the Lion ran alongside the large ship and began to engage within pistol-shot. The ships continued in that situation until ten, during which time they kept a continual fire at each other; when the Lion’s rigging being cut to pieces, her mizen-mast, mizen-top mast, main-yard, fore-top-sail-yard, and maintop-sail-yard shot away; all her lower-masts and topmasts shot through in many places, so that she lay muzzled in the sea, and could do nothing with her sails: the French ship sheered off, and in less than an hour was out of sight, the Lion not being able to follow her. The small ship in the beginning of the engagement made two attempts to rake the Lion, but was soon beat off by her stern chace, and after that lay off at a great distance. Forty-five of the Lion’s men were killed outright, and one hundred and seven wounded, seven of whom died of their wounds soon after.

Captain Brett was wounded and very much bruised in the arm; and his master had his right arm shot off in the beginning of the engagement. His lieutenants were all wounded two hours before the action was over; nevertheless they would not leave the deck, but continued ‘encouraging the men to the last, excepting the first lieutenant who was so much hurt that he was obliged to be carried off at nine o’clock, not being able to stand any longer.’

The bravery¹ manifested by this gentleman on the foregoing occasion was rendered more consequential to his country, from the circumstance of the ship which he had engaged being convoy to the frigate in which the son of the Pretender, then on his passage to Scotland, had

¹ Admiral Vernon, in a speech made by him in the house of commons, in the year 1747, in opposition to a motion of lord Baltimore’s, for bringing in a bill to reserve a portion of the captures of merchant ships, and thereby encourage that of ships of war, makes the following highly honourable mention of captain Brett.

embarked. Some judgement may be formed, of the intrinsic service rendered to Britain, by the foregoing encounter, from the following extract of a private letter from the Hague, dated July the 30th.

“The frigate, on board which the eldest son of the Pretender had embarked, was joined off Belleisle by the Elizabeth, of sixty-six guns. They intended to go round Ireland, and land in Scotland, but were met on the 20th by some English merchant-ships, convoyed by three ships of war; one of which, the Lion, bore down on the Elizabeth and attacked her; upon which the Pretender sailed away in the frigate. The fight lasted nine hours, but night coming on, the Elizabeth, quite disabled, got away to Brest; the captain and sixty-four men killed, one hundred and thirty-six dangerously wounded, and a great number slightly. She had on board 400,000*l.* sterling, and arms for several thousand men.”

“I have been too long engaged in naval affairs not to know several of the sea officers. I have, by those opportunities of knowing them, found them to be men who would omit no occasion of being serviceable to their country; and to appeal from imagination to certain facts, several of them have shewn as much alacrity in attacking ships of war as they have in taking merchant ships; nor do I doubt but the rest are ready to do it, whenever occasion shall offer. That this is the character which, at least, some of our officers deserve, is proved by the gallant behaviour of several, and particularly captain Brett. Did that gentleman behave as if he wanted farther encouragement to perform his duty? Did he not attack a ship of superior force to his own, and with such courage and skill as brought honour to himself, his country, and the British flag?”