Trafalgar: 200 Years Later

Paul Earl Evans relates the story behind one of history's most decisive sea battles

Admiral Lord Nelson was already a hero to the British. His death at Trafalgar was such a shock that it overshadowed the extraordinary victory that he achieved in the battle. Painting by Mike Haywood (*www.mikehaywoodart.co.uk*)

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, Trafalgar was the climax and culmination of battle in the age of sail. On 21 October 1805, at about noon, British Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson led 27 ships-of-the-line into the midst of 33 ships-of-the-line of the Combined (Franco-Spanish) Fleet. (A ship used in main battle line had at least 64 32- and 18-pounder guns and other smaller cannon.)

Five hours later, Nelson was dead and the commanding French Vice-Admiral Pierre Compte de Villeneuve was a prisoner. A great British victory had been gained. One French ship had blown up and 17 French and Spanish ships were captured as British prizes, four others had headed south away from the scene of destruction, and 11 limped toward the Spanish port of Cadiz.

The course of events at the battle of Trafalgar and its aftermath reveals elements reminiscent of a Greek drama.

Never before or since have so many battleships fought in a single engagement. Nelson's plan for the battle was effective and innovative, but so bold as to be almost reckless. However, he achieved his "battle of annihilation" at the ultimate personal sacrifice.

The battle resulted in the highest casualties of any sea battle up to that time. About 3,370 French lost their lives and 1,160 were wounded. Spanish killed or drowned amounted to 1,038 with 1,385 wounded. The British totals were some 450 dead and 1,241 wounded. More than 20,000 French and Spanish became prisoners.

Not a single British ship was lost, either in battle or in the ensuing storm.

The Tactics

The tactics which led to this decisive victory are worth examining.

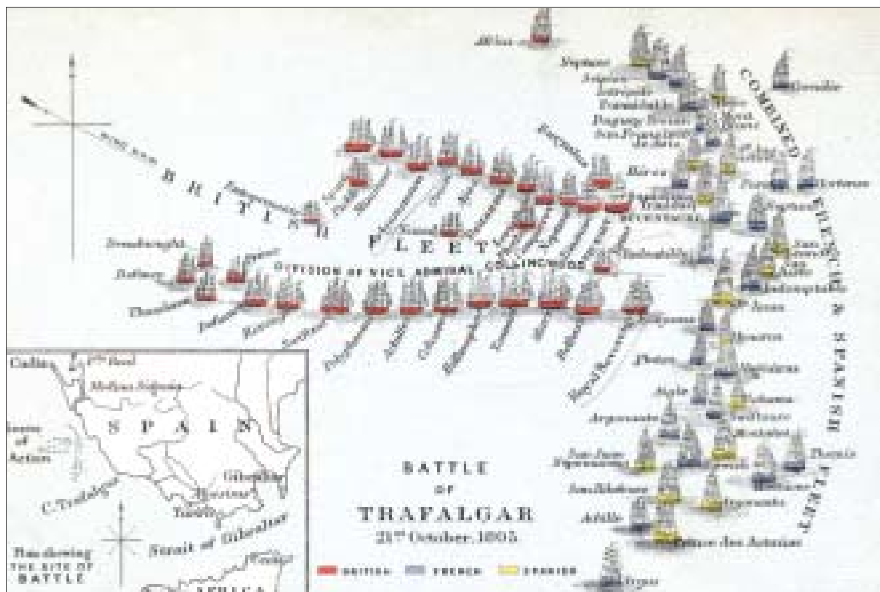
Throughout the 18th century, the methods of conducting battle at sea were rigidly adhered to. The opposing fleets approached "in line ahead" and offered battle to the enemy in a gradual approach which made decisive engagements rare. In 1757, British Admiral Byng was executed after losing the island of Minorca in a fleet engagement. His political enemies used the fact that Byng had departed from line-ahead tactics as the evidence that he was mortally culpable.

Admiral George Rodney departed from traditional linear methods at the Battle of the Saintes in 1782, and broke the French line in a resounding British victory. Other departures from line-ahead tactics were known as "massing" and "doubling", as Nelson had done in the victory at the Nile in 1798. Still, there was reluctance to depart from linear tactics, or to risk a melee with an enemy fleet.

Nelson changed these tactics at Trafalgar. On 21 October, in a light and unsteady west-northwest breeze, the Combined (Franco-Spanish) Fleet was headed north, back in the direction of Cadiz, Spain, from which it had come on 19 October. A large portion of the French fleet had been at Toulon, France in the Mediterranean for two years prior to the battle. During this time, Nelson had been blockading Toulon. He had conducted a "loose" blockade, hoping the French would come out so that he might bring them to battle.

Trafalgar was the result of Napoleon's attempt to overcome Britain's naval domination and achieve, at least temporarily, superiority in the English Channel so that his troops could invade England. He had set in motion a grand scheme of naval movements using his fleets much like chess

The combined Franco-Spanish fleet lost 18 ships while not a single British ship was lost. However, the British lost their favorite war hero, Admiral Lord Nelson



Nelson attacked the combined Franco-Spanish fleet in two columns. This tactic had never been used before. It resulted in terrible punishment for the lead ships in each of the British lines until the following ships joined the battle. However, despite the death of Nelson, the British victory at Trafalgar was one of the most decisive turning points in history leading to 110 years of British naval superiority.

pieces to decoy British ships away from the crucial area.

Villeneuve's Toulon fleet was a major element in Napoleon's plan. He did, in fact, manage to evade Nelson's blockade and sailed to the Caribbean.

By October 1805, Nelson had chased the French to the Caribbean and back and was determined to bring about his "battle of annihilation." He had blockaded the Franco-Spanish fleet in the Spanish port of Cadiz.

When Nelson saw the Combined Fleet about nine miles to the east on the morning of 21 October, one of his signals was to form two lines of battle. All his captains knew his intentions, such as to give battle in the same formation as his order of sailing. The famous Trafalgar Memorandum of 9 October makes the point: "But in case signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood, no Captain can do very wrong if he places his Ship alongside that of an enemy."

Villeneuve had anticipated Nelson's tactics but was helpless against them. He probably anticipated his own defeat but offered battle to Nelson out of honor.

It was Nelson's reliance upon his subordinates which formed a cornerstone of "the Nelson touch." He also signaled "general chase" to his ships, and later, "bear up in succession," and they were somewhat strung out as they approached the Franco-Spanish line from the west, at nearly a right angle to it. At about 11:30am, Nelson sent perhaps the most famous signal in naval history for his fleet: "England expects that every man will do his duty." Every ship's company reportedly answered with three loud cheers. Nelson headed to intercept the enemy center and rear. He knew it would be some time before the enemy's leading ships, the "van", could aid the rest of the Combined Fleet. Admiral Collingwood's "lee column" was strung out somewhat diagonally to the south of Nelson's "windward column."

British Superiority

The main areas of British tactical superiority over the French and Spanish were:

- Better gunnery (a higher and better sustained rate of fire).
- A more fully developed system of signaling.
- Better seamanship, partly due to the extent of the British merchant fleet and partly due to the experience of seakeeping during the years of blockading French and Spanish ports.
- More durable ship's construction and especially better dockyard maintenance.

These factors were known to both sides, forming a decisive British moral superiority factor, which was reinforced by widespread faith in Nelson himself.

There were other deciding factors which led to the British victory. The French revolution had devastated the navy's officer corps. Before 1789, naval officers had to be of noble blood. The revolutionary persecution of the nobility meant that most experienced naval officers had fled the country and their places were filled with former merchant and petty officers.

By contrast, at no other time in her history did Britain have such a panoply of competent, effective naval officers. Villeneuve made the ultimate tribute to the British navy: "To any other nation the loss of a Nelson would have been irreparable, but in the British fleet... every captain was a Nelson."

The seamen of the Combined Fleet were of poor quality, too, primarily because there were not as many seafarers in these countries from which to man the fleets. And in the case of the French, the drain of over two decades of war had decreased the pool of experienced seamen. Many of the crews of the French and Spanish fleets were in fact soldiers. Also, the crews of the Combined Fleet were poorly fed, owing to British control of the sea and the rugged Spanish terrain with its poor roads hampering supply lines.

The condition of most French and some Spanish ships was also poor. The Spanish ships were well built but even more poorly manned than were the French. On ship design, author Brian Lavery (*Nelson's Fleet at Trafalgar*) states that "French ships were faster in light winds and good conditions, but British ships were far tougher, to withstand the pressures of constant blockade and patrol."

Villeneuve, in a letter to

Above, the climax of the battle is shown in this painting by William Clarkson Stanfield from 1836. Although the British had 27 ships against 33 of the combined Franco-Spanish fleet, the result was far from equal. The British did not lose a ship but captured 17 of the enemy while one French ship blew up. The British did lose their beloved Nelson, who was shot by a French marine. His death is shown below in this engraving from a painting by D. Maclise.

Decres, said, "I declare to you, [these] … ships …are not in a state to attempt anything." Villeneuve was a pessimist but was accurate in his estimation of the inferior condition of his ships and crews.

The British could fire their guns at least twice as rapidly as the French or Spanish. This finding is somewhat mitigated by a limitation imposed by the technology of the cannon themselves. Increasingly heating up until red hot and bucking into the air as they were fired, the firing rates slowed as battle progressed. Blomefield at the Board of Ordinance had worked to improve the quality of the English cannon's metal to sustain a higher firing rate. British seamen were more accurate and their fleet became used to withholding their fire until the last moment. They then unleashed devastating broadsides with two, or even three, cannonballs in each gun. Also, the French navy had not provided its ships with deck carronades, the "crushers" so effectively employed by the British. The Spanish navy had its own large-bore artillery, which at this time mainly launched grenades and grape shot. At Trafalgar, the British carronades were effective at clearing the decks of enemy ships of boarding parties assembled to board the British ships.

The Battle

Admiral Nelson's final instruction as *Victory* went into battle was given to the frigate *Euryalis* which carried it down the weather line of ships. Knowing of the light breezes then slowing the fleet, he wished the ships of his group to abandon their prescribed order of sailing and "adopt whatever [sailing methods that the captains]… thought best, provided it led them quickly and closely alongside an enemy." The British captains, however, knowing that protocols which governed their behavior would protect them should any trouble arise from their conduct, did not respond to the order, and largely kept their places in line. This slowed the British approach and made it more difficult for Nelson's leading ships. The light breeze blew at only 1½ knots and the last ship in Nelson's column did not engage the enemy until over three hours after the first broadsides. The exception was Codrington, who swung the *Orion* out of line and advanced quickly into battle, relieving the leading ships and eventually capturing the French *Intrepide*. In Collingwood's column, the first eight ships reached the enemy rapidly.

Nelson's and Collingwood's own ships led their columns; this was extremely unusual at this time. Nelson led his column in a last minute maneuver toward the north to cut off Villeneuve, but swung back to get at the Franco-Spanish center when the French Vice-Admiral's *Bucentaure* ran up his flag, revealing the location. Defeating and capturing Villeneuve's ship was a high priority. A map from *The Naval Chronicle* shows the positions as the battle began. While inaccurate as to the British approach, it is thought to well represent the position of the Combined Fleet.

Nelson had been hoping and planning for a "pell-mell" battle. However, approaching an enemy line bows-on meant having to endure three to five broadsides in the ships' vulnerable bows before the British could answer fire. Only an intrinsic English battle superiority allowed for the decisive victory.

In the attack, Nelson led his "weather" column (closer to the direction from which the wind blew) into the center of the Combined Fleet in the 100-gun *Victory*, while Collingwood led his "lee column" into the midst of their rear in the *Royal Sovereign*.

The main battle, dreadful in its fury, loudness and thick black smoke, was decided by 4:30pm, when Nelson died. At close to 4:15pm, the *Victory* signaled for the fleet to come to windward on the starboard tack, and the final shots died out as darkness fell. By 5:30pm when the French *Achille* blew up, hostilities had long ceased.

The British ships of both columns which led the attack — the *Victory*, *Temeraire*, *Royal Sovereign*, *Belleisle* and *Bellerophon* — all had some degree of dismasting, and suffered the majority of the British casualties.

The weather was fresh and squally, with great swells from the west. A southerly gale was blowing on the 22nd, and the British fleet was attempting to stand to the west with its 17 prizes.

The Aftermath

Nelson had been adamant that the fleet anchor after the battle, as he knew that a storm was approaching. The sands of Cape Trafalgar to the east were treacherous and constituted the dreaded lee shore. A plea to Captain Hardy to anchor the fleet was among Nelson's dying words.

Collingwood was left as commander of the fleet after Nelson's death. He decided, controversially, not to anchor the fleet after he learned that some ships had anchors or anchor cables shot away. Transferring his flag to the frigate *Euryalis* which, though smaller than a ship-of-the-line, was undamaged, he kept the fleet together as best as he could during a week of storm. Towing cables for the disabled ships had parted as soon as the day after battle.

Collingwood was trying to use a dozen intact British ships-of-the-line to tend to a fleet totaling 44 battered ships-of-the-line. Before dawn on 23 October, the fierce winds had reached 60 knots. As many as eight captured ships from the Combined Fleet had been totally dismasted in the battle and many had lost a mast or two, with most of the rigging gone. Other ships lost damaged masts during the week of storms. At least 10 ships had to be taken in tow. There were not enough British seamen to repair hulls and masts and rigging, man the pumps (a labor intensive task), make and shorten sails, be available to man the guns, and man and guard the 17 prizes.

It was on the 23rd, during daylight hours of diminished storm, that the French Captain Cosmao-Kerjulien made a bold sortie from Cadiz. With five ships

The *Victory* was so badly damaged in the course of battle that there was some discussion that she should be abandoned. The crew almost mutinied: "We told the Captain as we had brought him out we would bring him home", remembered James Bayley, one of her seamen. Painting by Mike Haywood (*www.mikehaywoodart.co.uk*)

of the line and five frigates, he made an attempt to recapture British prizes. As it turned out, the weather was too rough for real fighting. The (French) *Neptune* and the *Santa Anna* were recaptured, but three Franco-Spanish ships were lost because of the weather during the effort. Two drove on shore. One managed to anchor only to be recaptured by the British two days later.

During 24 October, determined to save the British ships if possible in the face of lasting force-nine and -ten winds, Collingwood began deliberately destroying the "leewardmost" of the French and Spanish prizes, including the *Santisima Trinidad*, 136 guns. The largest, and one of the most beautiful ships in the world, was no more. Two prizes were retaken by the numerous prisoners on board, overpowering the small prize crews. "Captains Hope, Bayntun, and Malcolm, who joined the fleet this moment from Gibraltar, had the charge of destroying five others," Collingwood wrote. "The (French) *Redoubtable* sunk astern of the *Swiftsure*, while in tow," he added. "And such is the shattered-condition of the whole of them (the prizes), that unless the weather moderates, I doubt whether I shall be able to carry a ship of them into port." And the great French *Aigle* was reluctantly allowed to drive on shore, as did other ships.

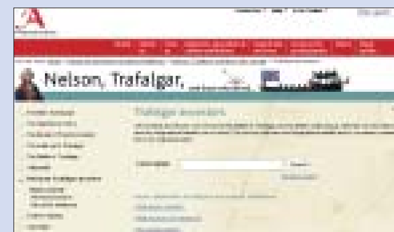
Some authors have thought that the prizes which were deliberately wrecked or sunk were so-disposed by the end of the 26th. Although the weather moderated somewhat on the 27th, the business was definitely completed on the day after that. Captain Blackwood of the *Euryalis* received a letter from Collingwood dated 4 November (*The Naval Chronicle*, 1999 edition) in which he discusses "the proceedings of the squadron to that time," referring definitely to 28 October. He says, "the weather continuing very bad, the wind blowing from the S.W., the squadron not in a situation of safety,... I determined to no longer delay the destroying [of the rest of] them." It was all over by the time Rear Admiral Louis arrived from Gibraltar, on the 30 October.

In the event, four prizes were saved off Cadiz and taken into Gibraltar. Three of the four had contrived to anchor on the first night after the battle. The other salvaged prize was the *San Juan Nepomuceno*. They were all 74-gun ships, which was a standard size for that period, as rated by number of guns. The "third-rate" 74's were the preferred marriage of gun strength, sea keeping and sailing ability, although larger ships were used as flagships and, as it were, to oppose other second- and first-rates. Six of the prizes had gone ashore, wrecking British prize crews on the Spanish coast.

At this time, an honorable cordiality was shown by the British and Spanish towards each other.

Did you have an ancestor at the Battle of Trafalgar?

The UK National Archives website (*www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/trafalgarancestors/*) has listed all of those who served in the Battle of Trafalgar (on the British side) along with their service histories and any biographical details found. The service histories and biographical details are by no means complete — this is an ongoing project.



Spanish wounded were landed and wrecked British seamen were returned to their fleet. Indeed, such was the good feeling between the two adversaries that casks of wine were exchanged.

There had been 10 ships in the van of the Combined Fleet largely unengaged through most of the battle. Two, Captain Infernet's *Intrepide*, and the French *Neptune*, eventually fought valiantly but were overwhelmed and taken by the British toward the end of the battle. (There was an English *Neptune* at Trafalgar, and a Spanish *Neptuno*, as well.) Four of the allied van joined seven others and fled into Cadiz. The French Rear Admiral Dumanoir, with four other ships, belatedly turned back to half-heartedly join in the fray. He apparently fired, during the effort, into captured, defenseless Spanish prizes of the British. He then escaped southward, heading toward the west coast of Spain with his four ships. British Captain Sir Robert Strachan brought him to heel on 3 November. All four of Dumanoir's ships were taken, off Ferrol, in what came to be called "Strachan's Action." Dumanoir's ships were severely damaged, with 750 dead, while there were only 135 British casualties. His fate thus provides a morally satisfactory conclusion to the occurrences after the Battle of Trafalgar.

Thus, four Franco-Spanish ships were saved from the original 17 prizes taken at Trafalgar itself, and four more ships surrendered to Strachan.

The final act was Nelson's funeral, held on 9 January 1806. One hundred captains and 31 admirals attended the service at St. Paul's Cathedral. His body had been sent back to England on his flagship, *Victory*, preserved in brandy. The news of Nelson's death seemed to count for more in England than did the welcome news of the naval victory. The victory at Trafalgar was especially timely as news of Napoleon's success over the Austrians at Ulm on 20 October 1805, had reached England nine days before the news of Trafalgar, spreading gloom. When news of the crushing French victory at Austerlitz on 2 December 1805, over the Russians and Austrians, reached British Prime Minister Pitt, he bitterly remarked of a map of Europe, "Roll up that map; it will not be needed these 10 years."

Eleven French and Spanish ships managed to limp back to Cadiz after the battle. Painting by Thomas Buttersworth.

However, Trafalgar was a decisive victory at a strategic level. In the battle of the elephant (France) versus the whale (England), it changed a great deal. Napoleon had ready an "Army of England" more than 112,000 strong, at Boulogne and other Channel ports. To invade England, France would need naval superiority in the Channel.

In fact these troops had been sent eastward before Trafalgar, on 29 August, to face the threat of Russian and Austrian troops. In England, there had been an invasion scare which Trafalgar alone had been able to diminish. As a result of Trafalgar, Spain was, practically speaking, deprived of its role as a maritime power. Communications with the New World became problematic, and the Spanish South American colonies soon revolted.

The only strategy left to Napoleon was a warfare of economics, by forbidding trade with Britain in areas under his control. The Berlin Decree of 1806 formalized his "Continental System".

Napoleon built more ships, but they lay idle, blockaded in port. And after the Treaty of Tilsit (1807), Europe lay at Napoleon's feet. However, in the Continental System and also because of Napoleon's habit of installing relatives and favorites as foreign kings, lay the seeds of nationalistic resistance and rebellion. Spain revolted in 1808 and the British supported them. Portugal and Sweden had always been inclined to support the British. Russia — indeed all of Europe — wanted to have access to British goods. The seeds of Napoleon's defeat had already been sown.

The restored *Victory* can be toured today, rebuilt as it was then, in Portsmouth Dockyard.

As a decisive strategic victory, Trafalgar changed the course of history. It gave the British navy a predominance throughout the 19th century. Only after the indecisive Battle of Jutland in 1916 was there any doubt as to Britain's primacy. This Pax Britannica saw to it that for 110 years the sea was a great free commons for commerce. Peace and freedom of the seas were ushered in by the victory of Trafalgar. The sea, however, had the last word.

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