

# NELSON AND TRAFALGAR AT 200

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This year (21 October) marks the 200th anniversary of the British victory over a combined fleet of French and Spanish ships in the Battle of Trafalgar. All year, celebrations have marked the occasion in Britain and in parts of its former Empire. But, why should Americans be interested in a battle in which no American ships took part and which took place after American independence? The answer lies in the fact that the outcome of that battle transcended the instant conflict and in the personality of a man, who in the words of Rear Admiral Joseph Callo, USNR (Ret.), author of several books on this topic and former editor of *The Log*, "changed the course of history from the quarterdecks of his ships."

The defeat of the combined fleet at Trafalgar was devastating. Eighteen out of 33 ships of the combined fleet were captured or destroyed with over 2,500 sailors killed. The British lost no ships, although some sustained heavy damage, and lost 441 sailors. The victory was so overwhelming that, despite the facts that the French had a formidable number of ships elsewhere and would build even more during Napoleon's reign, they could never attain the superiority over the Royal Navy needed for an invasion of Britain. This meant

that Napoleon's ambitions now had to be confined to the European mainland. Furthermore, Britain would remain an ever-present thorn in his side, subsidizing and inciting his continental enemies, harassing his operations from the sea, destroying his commerce, and supplying Britain's relatively small army in the bloody ulcer of the Peninsular War. While it took another decade for Napoleon's empire to collapse finally, its fall began at Trafalgar.



*The stern of Nelson's flagship HMS VICTORY. (Photo: R.H. Wagner)*

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For the young United States, news of the British victory was not entirely welcome. In 1798-99, the U.S. had fought an undeclared war with revolutionary France but the men who had led the country then, most notably the Federalists John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, were either dead or out of office by 1805. In their place, the country had elected Thomas Jefferson, a francophile, who in 1803, had paid Napoleon what was then considered a huge sum for a large tract of wilderness in what has become known as the Louisiana Purchase. Although Jefferson's attitude toward Napoleon deteriorated after Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of the French, Jefferson still saw Britain as the "tyrant of the ocean" and once wrote that America was "forced to wish success to Bonaparte, and look to his victories as our salvation". Moreover, immediately after Trafalgar, Britain was high-handed in exercising its domination of the seas. In 1807, the small ship-of-the-line HMS LEOPARD fired upon the frigate USS CHESAPEAKE when the American ship refused to submit to a search for British deserters and men to impress into the Royal Navy. This and other similar incidents, in turn, led to the Embargo Act and then to outright war in 1812. Thus, the unassailable naval position that Britain achieved at Trafalgar must not have looked like it was in the United States' interest.

However, while the British victory may not have been greeted in Washington with enthusiasm at the time, it was to benefit the United States in the long run. The Royal Navy would dominate the seas for more than a century. The Pax Britannia that resulted

benefited the United States economically as it increased world trade. It also facilitated the spread of democratic ideas and of the rule of law - - principles which Britain and the United States share. Furthermore, as time went on and the two nations came to have more common interests, American foreign policy was often backed-up by the Royal Navy. The best example of this is the Monroe Doctrine, which the small United States Navy could not have enforced at the time it was announced. Thus, the victory at Trafalgar had long run benefits for the United States as well as for Britain.

The second reason that the Battle of Trafalgar is of interest to Americans is the man without whom the victory would not have been possible, Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson. He was not born a lord. Rather, he was the son of a country vicar who was sent to sea in his early teens. With ambition and talent, he worked his way up the ladder becoming one of the British Navy's youngest captains and then a young admiral. His exploits at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent and his victories in the Battle of the Nile and at Copenhagen brought him titles and public adulation similar to that bestowed on rock stars today. A man of immense physical courage, he led from the front, suffering the loss of an arm and an eye. Indeed, he was to die of wounds received at the moment of his greatest triumph. In short, Nelson lived a very American-style success story.

For the naval professional, Nelson can be studied for his grasp of the strategic significance of his command. Nelson knew that a mere victory at Trafalgar would not be

enough. Instead, he knew that annihilation of the combined fleet was required in order to remove Napoleon permanently as an invasion threat. Similarly, Nelson was a superb tactician. While some of the tactics that he used at Trafalgar had been used occasionally before, Nelson was willing to break with settled doctrine and to risk using bold tactics to achieve his goal. As a leader, Nelson motivated his officers and men by showing an interest in them as individuals. He inspired such great devotion that the Trafalgar victory was little celebrated in the fleet because of the loss of its leader.



*Like USS CONSTITUTION, VICTORY remains in commission but is open to view by the public. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

If that were not enough, Nelson was a romantic. On a voyage to the East Indies early in his career, Nelson became seriously ill. Confined to his cabin for weeks, he had a vision of a "radiant orb" that told him that he was destined to accomplish great things and, over the years, the memory of that vision inspired him to overcome adversity. More well known is his passionate love-affair with Lady Emma Hamilton, one of the great beauties of the age. George Romney's portrait of Lady Hamilton in the Frick

Collection captures a uniquely exiting personality which makes understandable Nelson's willingness to risk everything in their scandalous love affair.

Adding further to the story is that the villain of the piece is one of the most fascinating geniuses of all time. Historians often cast Vice Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve, the commander of the combined fleet, as Nelson's opponent. However, to do so betrays a misunderstanding of Napoleonic France. The Emperor was a micromanager who slept only a few hours each night and who would dictate detailed instructions to multiple secretaries simultaneously on topics as varied as law, education, commerce, and, of course, military matters. For his land campaigns, Napoleon gathered around him a group of brave and talented generals such as Michel Ney, Joachim Murat, and Nicolas Soult. However, the allies eventually realized, the way to defeat the French was to engage the marshals when they were operating apart from the Emperor. This was because Napoleon kept them on such a short leash that they never really developed as independent commanders. Moreover, early 19th century communications were such that Napoleon could not have a full grasp of the situation when he gave his orders to distant commanders. This flaw in the system was to prove fatal during the Waterloo campaign when Grouchy was unable to deduce Napoleon's wishes regarding the Prussians from orders that appeared contradictory in light of the situation.

So too with Napoleon's admirals. The Emperor had a grand strategy for defeating Britain and plans for dealing

with the Royal Navy. Accordingly, he would dictate detailed instructions for his admirals. However, Napoleon was not a sailor and did not understand all of the differences between a land battle and a naval engagement. His admirals were either unwilling or unable to educate him. Nor was there anyone who could act as Louis Berthier, his chief of staff in his land campaigns, who could translate the Emperor's concepts into understandable practical orders. As a result, Villeneuve took the combined fleet to sea knowing that it would probably be defeated because he thought that was what the Emperor wanted.

Because there is so much of interest about Nelson, his life has inspired numerous fictional works about the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars whose heroes bear more than a faint resemblance to Nelson. While these books have entertained audiences around the world, the actual story is much more fascinating. Moreover, as Admiral Callo noted in a recent talk before the New York Commandery of the Naval Order of the United States, the events of that story have lessons for today. Nelson's use of preemptive tactics at Trafalgar can be contrasted with the ongoing war in Iraq. The French purge of aristocrats from their officer corps and its devastating consequences speak to us about the dangers of political correctness. The down-sizing of the Royal Navy during the short-lived Peace of Amiens warns of the hazard of thinking in terms of "peace dividends." In sort, one does not have to be British to learn from Nelson and Trafalgar.

With the 200th anniversary, a torrent of new books has been released about Trafalgar. Considering that the library shelves already bulge with volumes on the subject, one's first reaction is what more is there to say on the topic? However, because the topic is so multi-faceted, some of the new books are indeed worthwhile. One of these is *The Trafalgar Companion*, a compilation of essays by a number of distinguished scholars including Admiral Callo.

Like a reference book, *The Trafalgar Companion*, presents a series of self-contained essays on a variety of topics relating to the battle. These topics include the overall political and military situation, Nelson as a man and as a commander, the French and Spanish perspectives, contemporary naval tactics, Nelson's ship, the battle, and the ongoing legacy of the battle. The reader familiar with Trafalgar can turn to these essays not only to refresh his or her memory but also to learn new things. In that sense, the book serves as a companion in the study of the battle just as a knowledgeable guide serves as an aid in exploring a landmark.

At the same time, the book can be enjoyed by a person who is unfamiliar with the battle. While the essays stand alone, they are arranged in a logical progression so that a reader beginning at page one of the book and reading to the end will be told the story and not get lost. In addition, the essays are well-written and the book is beautifully illustrated.

Collections of essays often suffer from two problems. First, the quality of writing is often uneven. Second, the writers tend to repeat what each other

has said. However, The Trafalgar Companion avoids these problems which is a compliment to the editor, Alexander Stilwell. While some essays are better than others, they are all good. Similarly, the authors stick to their own topics without going over the same ground as their colleagues.

If there is a deficiency in this book, it is in its coverage of the life of Nelson. There is no mention of his spiritualism and there is relatively little on his relationship with Lady Hamilton. The man cannot be understood properly without exploring these sides of his personality. However, this is a book about the battle rather than a biography of Nelson and thus one must expect some aspects of his life to receive less treatment than others.

In sum, while no single volume can provide a comprehensive treatment of Trafalgar, The Trafalgar Companion provides a good concise discussion that can serve as an introduction while still providing those already familiar with the topic with new and interesting information. It is the type of book that one can turn to again and again.