

# ADMIRAL NELSON'S IMPORTANCE AT THE VICTORY OF TRAFALGAR

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The death of Britain's most fearsome admiral brought the King of England to speechlessness.<sup>1</sup> Bells tolled while England mourned for Horatio Nelson, the Hero of the Nile. He led stunning victories in Egypt, Copenhagen, and finally at Trafalgar. By force of will and with a cunning wit, he single-handedly faced France's best naval commanders and defeated them, outnumbered and outgunned. However, his greatest achievement was also his last. The Battle of Trafalgar, fought off its cape, ended with the annihilation of Napoleon's navy and squandered any plans for an invasion of England, but it had a cost. Nelson embodied the qualities that Britain needed in its commanders: courage, professionalism, experience, and a divine calling, and "Any man would have surrendered the victory to save the life of Nelson."<sup>2</sup> His ultimate sacrifice was characteristic of Britain's best naval officer, and Trafalgar would not have been fought, and could not have been won without him.

The "Nelson Touch" plan that Nelson utilized at the Battle of Trafalgar, on October 21, 1805, was more than just unorthodox. It was daring. Nelson's greatest fear was that the enemy would retreat to the safety of Cadiz, or for the straight of Gibraltar, where the French and Spanish forces had a means of escape. Thus, the plan was organized around the idea that the British could not let the French and Spanish escape. The opposing forces, numbered thirty-three against Nelson's twenty-six, were commanded by Admiral Pierre-Charles-Jean-Baptiste-Silvestre de Villeneuve.<sup>3</sup> After formulating a plan to force the battle,

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Pocock, *Horatio Nelson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 334.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bennett, *Nelson the Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 258.

Nelson called for all of his captains to meet on the flagship *Victory*, almost two weeks before the battle would take place. He outlined his plan: to force the battle by a direct assault made in two lines of approximately thirteen ships each. Nelson knew that the enemy's numbers were too great to form a disciplined firing line, especially against the wind and in rough seas. By sending two columns through the enemy ranks, he planned to entangle the rear half of the enemy fleet, preventing their escape and leaving the front half to helplessly sail onwards past the battle. This also utilized British cannons, which could fire through the enemy ships while passing through the line. A cannonade through the bows and sterns did the most damage, passing through the entire length of the ship and crew and endangering all aboard.<sup>4</sup> Though the plan was a great success on paper, "new, singular, and simple," it was also incredibly dangerous.<sup>5</sup> Nelson's most powerful ships would need to be at the front of the attacking lines, ready to thrust between the French and Spanish ships-of-the-line and their vicious broadsides. Steady discipline would have to carry the ship through enemy fire for an astounding forty minutes until the columns could cut the enemy lines. The weather indicated there would be only light breeze on the day of the battle – not much to carry the British fleet seven miles to their target, a long way away.

Admiral Nelson's plan was unique because it required unparalleled daring. Nelson was notoriously vain, and at Trafalgar in particular he had a complete disregard for his own personal safety. The French ship *Redoubtable*, the French's best trained ship-of-the-line was particularly well known for its marine snipers and boarders, who would eventually grapple and cut down many on the *Victory*.<sup>6</sup> The *Santisima Trinidad*, the largest Spanish warship in the world at this time, bristled with 138 guns. The French and Spanish combined had more guns, more warships, more marines and soldiers, and had gathered a superior and overwhelming force.<sup>7</sup> Bravery was an understatement; it was reported that "Admiral Nelson was on the lead ship, the 'Victory,' that would bear the brunt of the action in the center of the enemy's line before the rest of the fleet could come to assistance."<sup>8</sup> Nelson's disregard for personal safety left that responsibility with his crew. They desperately made last minute changes to protect him. Multiple recommendations were made: that he move his admiral's flag to another ship to draw off attention, to cover his

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Pocock, *The Terror Before Trafalgar* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 203.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 259.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Hart, *England Expects* (London: Wayland Publishers, 1972), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 268.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

flamboyant medals for bravery to obscure him from marine fire, and that the *Victory* might serve as the second or third ship in the line rather than leading the charge.<sup>9</sup> Refusing every accommodation, having already lost his right arm and the sight in his right eye, the reckless Nelson's unbridled aggression kept him in harm's way everywhere he went. His upbringing as a midshipman shows another instance of courage, an example of him even while he was still maturing. At the mere age of fourteen he was fiercely reprimanded for sneaking ashore from the *Carcass* and trying to hunt a large bear that he saw.<sup>10</sup> It was reported that he was so excited when his frigates spotted enemy before the Battle of the Nile, from August 1-3, 1798, that he could not eat or sleep, though the battle was still days off.<sup>11</sup> Nelson himself said that, "If I fall on such a glorious occasion (as the battle of Trafalgar) it shall be my pride that I take care that my friends shall not blush for me . . . my mind is calm, I have only to think of destroying the foe."<sup>12</sup> He envied his second-in-command Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood for being fired on first, and meeting with the enemy. Nelson exclaimed, "See how that noble fellow Collingwood takes his ship into action! How I envy him!" Collingwood knew his colleague Nelson too well, because in his diary he responded, "What Nelson would give to be here!"<sup>13</sup> There is no shortage of examples of Nelson's consistent courage. While planning, fighting, or commanding, Nelson stood upright and steadfast and feared nothing. Few men in the navy were so cold and stoic that they could even devise a plan where two ships would bear the brunt of the entire Franco-Spanish navy in order to gain the advantage, and then put themselves at the most dangerous point.

Similar to British officers, contemporary American officers are expected to adhere to specific values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. Nelson possessed these traits. He considered himself a man of duty, acting not for personal gain, but instead because his country needed him. Though he did earn fame and glory, his first adherence was always to what he felt was his duty: "England expects that every man will do his duty."<sup>14</sup> That is the message that Nelson sent to the fleet hours before combat; it is what he thought would be most inspirational before attack. After the battle, records showed that English vessels fired three broadsides for every French volley – that

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>10</sup> Pocock, *The Terror*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Hart, *England Expects*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Pocock, *The Terror*, 203.

<sup>14</sup> Jon E. Lewis, *How it Happened: Trafalgar First-Hand Accounts* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 162.

the English sailors were able to load and fire cannons three times as quickly as their foreign counterparts.<sup>15</sup> More than mere practice, this is the direct result of a strict sense of discipline enforced from the highest officer's ranks down through to the enlisted men. Standing by the cannons, loading, firing, even while the larger French navy engaged them meant direct results during combat: "The state of a ship and its company was a test of the officer's inner moral qualities."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the rapid fire of Britain's sailors reflected the discipline and fine officership managing her warships. An officer's honor was vital, and Nelson did not take it lightly: being inclined to engage ships worthy of his admiral's status, he sought out Villeneuve's personal flagship before being cut off by the *Redoubtable*. Combat did not taint the ideals of honor and integrity, but rather sharpened them in the face of the enemy.

Nelson's sense of officership was also vital because each ship was considered a microcosm of civilization. It was the job of the sailors to obey, but it was the job of the officers to be right.<sup>17</sup> The way that every captain treated his ship was the same as how Nelson treated his captains, and so on. Every English ship was well trained and well equipped, but Nelson's qualities specifically empowered the performance of his fleet. Sailors emulated him: "We are all busy scraping our ships' sides to paint them in the way Lord Nelson paints the *Victory*."<sup>18</sup> A role model, a hero, Nelson did not only spend his time commanding the fleet; rather, he considered the fate of his men, who suffered the good or bad fortune of his decisions. The Governor of Malta who fought with Nelson at the Battle of the Nile said that, "never was a commander loved so enthusiastically by men of all ranks."<sup>19</sup> Nelson had individual consideration for the common sailor serving underneath him; in the hours before first shots were fired he moved among them on the gun decks below and spoke and joked with them. He never forgot to mention how terribly the French would suffer.<sup>20</sup> And every time he was wounded, he refused to be treated before his other sailors. Each man aboard the *Victory*, and in the entire fleet, responded to Nelson's leadership with joy – his presence raised morale, inspired

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<sup>15</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 280.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Nicolson, *Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and the Battle of Trafalgar* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolson, *Seize the Fire*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Pocock, *The Terror*, 198.

<sup>19</sup> "Admiral Lord Nelson," *The Dublin Penny Journal* 13, no. 155 (1835), 405.

<sup>20</sup> Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 324.

confidence, and his loyalty to England was unquestionable. "I have much to lose but little to gain," he explained, "I go because it's right."<sup>21</sup>

At the Battle of Trafalgar, Nelson was forty-seven. He had thirty-five years of naval experience, earned on merchant ships, Royal Navy vessels, and ships-of-the-line. En route to Trafalgar Nelson sketched what he estimated would be the enemy disposition, he made a tentative plan for how to overwhelm the French even with fewer numbers, and he even made two separate plans for windward and leeward positioning.<sup>22</sup> His knowledge of the sea was excellent, and it contributed to "Nelson's Touch" which worked so effectively against the opposing fleet. Experience provided Nelson with one definitive objective, knowing the danger facing England and the opposition of the continental aggressor Napoleon. He desired the total annihilation of his enemies and a glorious peace for Britain.<sup>23</sup> Experience on the seas served him well, because Nelson was asked to rapidly take command of the fleet and use it to destroy the French without much time for administrative adjustments. He ordered the ships to be well stocked, delivered the preliminary plans to the commanders, took command of his flagship, and moved the fleet in a position where it could not be seen. Requiring more ships for scouting and movement, he requested more frigates under his command.<sup>24</sup> The master of morale, Nelson made sure to send out constant messages of encouragement to the fleet, and also to have the bands play invigorating music. His vision was of the navy leaping at France's forces at the first sign of their leaving safe harbor, and he prepared his forces relentlessly for it.

Nelson organized the lines assaulting the Franco-Spanish position based on learned naval tenets. Focusing on superiority of fire and dividing the enemy's forces, he placed the heaviest of his ships as the tip of the spear. He needed his lines to bully their way past the ships-of-the-line and separate the ships from their commander, and the front of the line. At the front of the first line were the ships *Victory*, *Temeraire*, and *Neptune*. At the head of the second line was Nelson's close friend and second in command, Admiral Collingwood leading the *Royal Sovereign*, *Belleisle*, and *Mars*. Nelson expected his line to reach contact with the enemy first; though he had only six 100-gun ships-of-the-line, three of them were the *Victory*, *Temeraire*, and *Neptune*.<sup>25</sup> Nelson was wise enough to have as

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<sup>21</sup> Hart, *England Expects*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Horatio Nelson, *Letters from Lord Nelson* (London: Staples Press, 1949), 452.

<sup>24</sup> Hart, *England Expects*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 270.

his second command a man of great tenacity; one who did not shirk away when by a turn of the wind, the second line reached the French first.

Nelson's goal of total annihilation of the French and Spanish was inherent in the plan for another reason. Not only did the two column attack work to divide the enemy and to sweep their decks lengthwise, but it also prevented any escape.<sup>26</sup> By forcing a divide in the French line, all the ships behind the divide had to continue sailing towards the British forces. Nelson ensnared the enemy to prevent their withdrawal from the battle – his greatest fear. Nelson ordered his ships to hold their fire until they reached point blank range and breached the enemy line. The sailors loaded their cannons with double shots, putting two cannon balls in one cannon.<sup>27</sup> The two cannon balls would be wildly inaccurate while fired at once, but again this is why Nelson maintained that the British should not fire until at point blank range. The entire course of the battle was managed by a skilled admiral who consistently knew what he wanted to do. Nelson had a plan and executed it: against an enemy reluctant to fight, his experience transformed a fleet fighting at disadvantage into a deadly machine. Throughout the weeks before Trafalgar, and even during the battle, Nelson was unpredictably calm. Though he predicted that he was going to his death, a strong protestant upbringing characterized his view of fate and destiny. Nelson acted out of a strong sense of divine-calling. The morning before Trafalgar, he wrote, "I commit my life to Him, who made me, and may his blessing light upon my endeavors for serving my Country faithfully."<sup>28</sup> An hour or so later Nelson's signal officer walked into his quarters to find him on his knees in prayer.<sup>29</sup> Beyond naval experience, Nelson's religious devotion found a place in a profession marred by death. Even in his last moments, Nelson thanked God that he was able to carry out his duty, and spoke of his sins.<sup>30</sup> Nelson expected nothing less than death, standing tall on the poop deck while broadsides roared across the deck. However, he could not have taken these risks and led so bravely and professionally at the front of his fleet without believing that he fought for God, and that what he did was part of a greater plan. Religion brought certainty to naval battles that seldom had predictable outcomes.

Nelson's presence was electrifying to his subordinates: "The mood of the fleet changed as its seventeen thousand men realized that

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Ingram, "Illusions of Victory: the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar Revisited," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (1984), 140; and Hart, *England Expects*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 268.

<sup>28</sup> Nelson, *Letters from Lord Nelson*, 455.

<sup>29</sup> Pocock, *The Terror*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 275; and Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 334.

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Nelson was amongst them. His own joy matched theirs.”<sup>31</sup> Nelson was a Napoleon at sea: his presence changed the essence of any battle. His noble courage, professional officership, extensive seafaring experience, and divine calling made him the most dangerous naval commander during the Napoleonic era. Singlehandedly, Nelson redefined the land campaigns of Europe by thwarting Napoleon's invasion of England and altered the course of history even beyond the reach of the seas. Though his master plan, “Nelson's Touch” was his final masterpiece, victory could not have been assured without his presence. His bravery was unmatched and unstoppable. He was honorable, dedicated to duty, and disciplined; all attributes necessary to maintain his plan and keep order during Trafalgar's critical moments. Nelson clearly displayed an understanding of naval strategy beyond many of his peers, and experience gained over a lifetime at sea. Finally, his religious beliefs were integrated into his understanding of duty, God, and Country. The Battle of Trafalgar could not have been forced, and would not have been won, without the decisive leadership of Britain's most famous naval commander, Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 318

