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## **Why does the Royal Navy still celebrate Trafalgar Night?**

[On 22 October 2015 the SSI's Dr Martin Robson will deliver the Trafalgar Night After Dinner Speech at MOD Corsham. This transcript is based on that speech.]

Looking back to the events of 21 October 1805 from the perspective of 2015 it seems that so much has changed. The life of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson and his death at the Battle of Trafalgar seem a world away. We have witnessed two hundred and ten years of technological change, from wooden built sailing ships to steam and iron armour, from roundshot shot to exploding shell, we have seen the development of war under the sea in the form of submarines, mines and torpedoes, and above the sea with air, UAVs and ISTAR. We live in a nuclear world concurrent with the rise of the non-state actor. We benefit from (mostly) instant global communications. What does the son of a Norfolk parson and the events of a naval battle still have to say to us?

If you take a moment to think about the Royal Navy in the Age of Nelson – what springs to mind? Perhaps the whiff of gunpowder, the startling victory won that day and the cruel twist of fate that cut down the hero in his hour of glory? Or perhaps a picture of floating hell holes manned by the dregs of society hoovered up by the dreaded press gang? Or maybe Churchill's quip that the Royal Navy was all about rum, sodomy and the lash? Some myths continue to perpetuate. If, however, the Royal Navy was like Churchill and others portrayed how was it so successful over twenty-two years of conflict with France, Spain amongst others? How did it win six major fleet battles and a host of smaller engagements?

This auspicious year, 2015, has seen a number of other major historical commemorations with Waterloo 200 on 18 June and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain on 12 July. The focus in the UK was very much on the role of the British Army under the Duke of Wellington winning Waterloo and the Royal Air Force defeating the German Luftwaffe in 1940. Yet, both victories were joint, with the Royal Navy playing a role, and allied. Think of all the brave Polish, Czech, Commonwealth pilots who took to the skies to defend the UK in 1940 and, of course, the role of the Royal Navy in providing the ultimate bastion against German invasion. An invasion, that it turns out, was highly unlikely but one that if launched would have been smashed by the Royal Navy. At Waterloo Wellington's polyglot force included Dutch Belgians, Brunswickers and of course the Prussians turning up in timely fashion. As for the Royal Navy, Waterloo had in fact been won a decade earlier, on 21 October off Cape Trafalgar by the fleet under the command of Nelson, a subject to which we will return in due course.

So let's turn to Nelson and what he has to say to us today. He was not just a 'Great Britain' but perhaps the first modern celebrity with the controversial private life to boot. Unlike a previous generation of Admirals, men such as Rodney, St Vincent, or his great contemporary Wellington, Nelson seems so human, so modern. He had his foibles and he made mistakes. He was sometimes ruled by his heart not his head. His pride cost many men their lives and Nelson his right arm at Tenerife in 1797 and his conduct at Naples in 1798 was a dereliction of duty. But he reflected upon and learned from his mistakes.

In 1805 he showed immense morale courage and leadership as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet. When the French fleet under Pierre Villeneuve eventually escaped into the Atlantic, having picked up some Spanish ships at Cadiz, Nelson focussed on his prime object, destroying that fleet and started a transatlantic chase to the West Indies. Nelson, like many others, believed Villeneuve's voyage was a feint to draw naval force away from home waters but it still had to be dealt with. While Nelson's operational object was to defeat that French and Spanish fleet, thereby

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preventing any possible French invasion of the British Isles, he understood the wider strategic purpose was also to safeguard British colonies and trading interests in the West Indies. 'I was in a thousand fears for Jamaica' Nelson wrote concerned about the about the damage Villeneuve might cause, 'I was bred, as you know, in the good old school, and taught to appreciate the value of our West India possessions'. The fears for Jamaica were well founded, the island accounted for half of all British investments in the region. Nelson understood the true centre of gravity of the British war effort was maritime commerce.

The chase to the West Indies reminds us of the fact that Trafalgar was a campaign, not just a battle fought on 21 October 1805. In fact the Battle of Trafalgar was not even the most decisive moment. That came on 22 July off Cape Finisterre when Admiral Robert Calder's 15 sail of the line prevented Villeneuve's 20 sail of the line from entering the Channel. In a masterstroke of strategy Calder has been purposely positioned there by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Barham, who had received intelligence that Villeneuve's combined fleet was heading back from the West Indies. The invasion threat was over as Villeneuve headed south for Cadiz giving Nelson the opportunity to catch him. So why don't we commemorate Calder's Action Night? Simply put, it is the allure of the Nelson story and the fact that Trafalgar was the most decisive *tactical* battle of the Age of Sail.

The Nelson story remains important today due to his radical consensual leadership style; in stark contrast to the norms of the time. He held dinners onboard his flagship HMS *Victory* to talk tactics and to ensure his subordinates bought into his tactical vision:

'The Officers who came on board to welcome my return, forgot my rank as Commander-in-Chief in the enthusiasm with which they greeted me. As soon as these emotions were past, I laid before them the Plan I had previously arranged for attacking the Enemy; and it was not only my pleasure to find it generally approved, but clearly perceived and understood.'

Nelson explained the effect to Emma: 'it was like an electric shock. Some shed tears, all approved – It was new – it was singular – it was simple!'; and, from admirals downwards, it was repeated: 'It must succeed, if ever they will allow us to get at them!' Here Nelson hit upon the crux of the matter, for two years he had been frustrated for the French and Spanish had avoided battle, would they now provide him with that opportunity? Nelson was worried they would not and so decided upon a highly aggressive, even perhaps foolhardy, plan. He assumed that the French and Spanish fleets would not stand up to him but would run for port. That drove his thinking.

On the morning of 21 October 1805 Nelson's fleet attacked in two columns, one led his second in Command Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood in the *Royal Sovereign*. The other he led personally in *Victory*. It was dangerous but Nelson wanted to seek out the enemy flagship and land his punch directly against it. Collingwood had declared to his officers 'Now, gentlemen, let us do something to-day which the world may talk of hereafter' as *Royal Sovereign* was in action first. *Victory* was under fire for around 40 minutes before her broadsides could respond. Nelson's secretary John Scott was cut in two by a roundshot and shortly afterwards a shot passed between Nelson and his Flag Captain Thomas Hardy while a splinter tore the buckle off Hardy's shoe. Both men stopped, 'to survey each other with inquiring looks, each supposing the other to be wounded. His Lordship then smiled, and said: "This is too warm work, Hardy, to last long" and declared that through all the battles he had been in, he had never witnessed more cool courage than was displayed by the *Victory*'s crew on this occasion.'

Battle was joined as shot tore into wood and flesh. *Victory*'s Royal Marine Second Lieutenant, Lewis Rotely recalled:

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‘We were engaging on both sides; every gun was going off. A man should witness a battle in a three-decker from the middle deck, for it beggars all description: it bewilders the senses of sight and hearing. There was the fire from above, the fire from below, besides the fire from the deck I was upon, the guns recoiling with violence, reports louder than thunder, the decks heaving and the sides straining. I fancied myself in the infernal regions, where every man appeared a devil. Lips might move, but orders and hearing were out of the question; everything was done by signs.’

Alexander Scott, Victory’s Chaplain, described the scene on-board around this time as a ‘Butcher’s shambles’ and, almost inevitably on the exposed quarterdeck, at 13:15 Nelson fell with a musket ball lodged against his spine.

The slaughter was even worse on French and Spanish ships as the combined fleet withstood for a few hours – Nelson had indeed misjudged the fighting capacity of the enemy. Nevertheless, with fresh ships coming into action it was the Royal Navy’s superior discipline, gunnery, aggression, leadership and unity of purpose, the factors that had underpinned Nelson’s plan for a pell mell battle, which gave Britain victory. The French and Spanish lost 21 ships of the line out of their original 33, the Royal Navy not a single ship.

There was no time for reflection for with a storm brewing those sailors and officers who had spent the day fighting a human enemy now fought a desperate battle against the elements. Of the 21 prizes only four would make it into the Royal Navy as others were cut free and left to their fates. Midshipman Henry Walker of the *Bellerophon* was part of the prize crew on the *Monarca*. He had not feared death during the battle, but now during the storm ‘saw the fear of death so strongly depicted on the countenances of all around me, I wrapped myself up in a Union Jack and lay down upon the deck’ fully expecting to be dashed to pieces on the rocks. He was lucky to survive, many did not.

Nelson’s fleet lost 458 men killed that day with 1,208 wounded. Many of those were not English or British for the Royal Navy was very much a multinational force. On-board *Victory* were sailors from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Malta, Low Countries, Portugal, Germany, Brazil, the West Indies, Canada, Italy, Africa, Switzerland, America and France. In a wider sense too, for much of the period allies were integral to British grand strategy – Austria, Portugal, Russia, Prussia and from 1808 Spain – the fight against Napoleon was an allied European effort.

For France Trafalgar signalled the end of decisive battle as a viable concept and shattered any remaining *esprit de corps*. Trafalgar forced Napoleon to look to other ways to bring Britain to heel by starting an economic war against which could only ever be fought on British terms. Trafalgar ensured Britain imposed her will upon Napoleon, forcing him to fight where Britain was stronger. When that did not work Napoleon was forced into invading Spain and Russia, sowing the seeds of his long-term decline. Over the longer-term for the rest of the nineteenth century French naval thinking was very much asymmetric based around the *guerre de course* and musing of the *Jenne Ecole* when faced with superior British naval power. For her Spanish ally Trafalgar was truly decisive, for it cut the link between Spain and her Empire. Spain was simply no longer a first rate power.

Nelson and others were dead and he would be mourned and sorely missed, but the sailors and officers of HMS *Victory* and the wider Royal Navy still had a job to get on with. By the time of Trafalgar they had been getting on with it for the best part of 12 years. But it took 10 more years to defeat Napoleon, so was Trafalgar truly decisive for Britain? Apart from forcing Napoleon to fight on Britain’s terms, yes it was, for when peace did come for Britain in 1815, it was a successful peace largely due to the activities

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of the Royal Navy over the course of a period of conflict longer than the duration of the world wars of the twentieth century combined – and then doubled.

In similar vein to 1940, after Trafalgar 1805 Britain would not lose the war by military defeat. The question after 1805 became what sort of victory was Britain fighting for? Here we return to the assertion that Waterloo, which provided Britain with so much leverage in shaping the post war situation, was won at Trafalgar. Economic prosperity founded upon the exercise of seapower after 1805 gave Britain the power to grant subsidies of £10 million to her allies in 1814 and £8,649,725 in 1815. Crucial in this latter figure was the £2 million to Russia and the £2,156,513 to Prussia: it was British money that kept Blücher's army in the field, ready to appear at Waterloo in timely fashion. The Prussian Field Marshal August Graf Niedhardt von Gneisenau, Blücher's chief of staff, alluded to this when he who wrote of Britain after the battle of Waterloo: 'they are the Lords of the sea, and neither in this dominion nor in world trade have they any rivals left to fear'. That was based upon the command of the sea created by Trafalgar and exploitation of that command over the next decade culminating in Belgium in 1815.

Much water has passed under the bridge since the events of 1805 and 1815 and the context may have changed but for an Island nation, interaction with the sea is still the lifeblood of the nation. Moreover, great national heroes are important for the very reason that they ascend from the ranks of mortal historical figures into the realm of legend and myth. By doing so they not only still speak to us today, but more importantly they tell us something about ourselves. They provide us with a window into our national psyche, what we, as the British nation, think are important. That is why in a year when there has been so much focus on Waterloo and the Battle of Britain, we continue to commemorate the battle of Trafalgar and the 'Immortal Memory' of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson.

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