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# NELSON

## WHAT MADE HIM GREAT?

BOLDNESS, GENIUS AND A RARE WILLINGNESS TO RISK ALL IN PURSUIT OF VICTORY

BY JOSEPH F. CALLO

**F**ew would disagree that Great Britain's Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson (1758–1805) was a great naval leader. Indeed, many historians consider him the world's foremost naval leader. But that judgment begs an important question: How does one define Nelson's greatness?

In his 1897 biography of Nelson, no less an authority than U.S. naval theorist Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan described the hero of the Battles of the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar in breathtaking terms:

*The one man who in himself summed up and embodied the greatness of the possibilities which sea power comprehends—the man for whom genius and opportunity worked together to make him the personification of the navy of Great Britain. ... The name of Nelson is enrolled among those few presented to us by history the simple mention of which suggests not merely a personality or a career but a great force or a great era concrete in a single man.*

A more recent Nelson biographer, British journalist and naval historian Tom Pocock, described him simply as “Superman with Everyman's weaknesses.”

Those contrasting characterizations, separated by more than a century, reinforce Nelson's professional stature. They do little, however, to help us understand what was behind the widespread acclaim, and it is the distinguishing elements of Nelson's persona, rather than a catalog of his victories, that are the most instructive markers of his greatness.

Happily, Nelson's own letters survive to help us discern the personal qualities that were the essence of his greatness. At one point in his career he referred to his letters as “the inward monitor of my heart.”

For example, after being deployed to the Baltic in March 1801 as second in command to Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, Nelson wrote Parker regarding the Danish fleet that threatened Britain's strategic position in the Baltic. At the beginning of the long, analytical letter he writes, “The more I have reflected, the more I am confirmed in [the] opinion that not a moment should be lost in attacking the enemy.” After recommending a direct attack against the Danish fleet, Nelson summed up, “The measure may be thought bold, but I am of [the] opinion the boldest measures are the safest.” In the final six words of that statement Nelson described a combat doctrine that was a consistent force multiplier for him and clearly a primary element of his greatness. And it was that combat doctrine—first evinced early in his career—that carried him to an unlikely victory in the ensuing, bloody and strategically important April 2, 1801, Battle of Copenhagen.

The ultimate and final demonstration of Nelson's forward-leaning combat doctrine came at the Battle of Trafalgar. On Oct. 21, 1805, he faced a combined French-Spanish force of 33 ships of the line, while his fleet consisted of just 27 ships of the line. When the cannon smoke cleared, however, Nelson's





● A shrewd strategist, bold tactician and inspirational leader, Nelson—portrayed here as a vice admiral shortly before the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar—excelled as a naval commander despite chronic seasickness.

fleet had captured 17 ships of the combined French-Spanish fleet and sunk one while losing not a single British ship captured or sunk. His astonishing victory marked the beginning of a century of dominance at sea by the Royal Navy, and for a final time Nelson's aggressive fighting doctrine had played a key role, though he himself did not survive the battle.

In at least one instance, however, Nelson's boldness nearly cost him his career. At the July 1797 Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, he took his "boldest measures are the safest" doctrine to an extreme, in the process violating a surprising number of basic rules of amphibious warfare. Nelson attacked the Spanish port with too small a ground force, failed to scout the terrain with which he was dealing, underestimated the opposing general and lost the element of surprise at the beginning of the assault.

The outcome was a disastrous British defeat. Nelson's force suffered heavy casualties, he lost his right arm, and his naval career was nearly scuttled. Nelson's mentor and commander in chief, Admiral of the Fleet John Jervis—newly elevated to the title of 1st Earl of St. Vincent—saved Nelson's career by emphasizing the courageous efforts made by the British force, while deemphasizing its ultimate failure. That episode, and particularly its aftermath, demonstrated that even noted military leaders—withstanding their ultimate greatness in the eyes of later generations—often have to be saved from themselves during their lifetimes.

**T**here was a second key to Nelson's greatness, a companion to his combat doctrine: His willingness to risk his career in pursuit of victory. In 1799 Nelson wrote a letter to the Duke of Clarence that sheds light on this quality:

*To serve my king, and to destroy the French, I consider as the great order of all from which little ones spring; and if one of these little ones militates against it (for who can tell exactly at a distance?), I go back to obey the great order.*

In effect Nelson was explaining to a man who had significant influence on his career how he was willing to risk that career by "interpreting" orders from his seniors. That willingness made him unpopular with some of his fellow Royal Navy officers and presumably with those who might be risk-averse at the Admiralty and Whitehall.

Signs that Nelson was not risk-averse when it came to his career had come early. For example, in 1784, as the 26-year-old commanding officer of the 28-gun frigate HMS *Boreas*, Nelson

pitted himself against his local military commander as well as on-site civilian leaders in the West Indies.

The basis of the dispute was Nelson's enforcement of the Navigation Acts, a series of parliamentary acts that forbade trade among its colonies by foreign shipping. At the time the Admiralty sent Nelson to the region, local British government officials, plantation owners and commercial leaders virtually ignored the acts. For the local populace such defiance was a matter of economic survival, as it relied on the trade with America for food and other staples.

But for the young captain of *Boreas* it was a simple matter of "the law is the law," and almost as soon as he arrived in the West Indies, he began blocking American trade. His actions triggered open disputes, notably with Rear Admiral Sir Richard Hughes, his superior on the station. In a letter to former mentor Captain William Locker, Nelson rationalized the hazard to his career:

*I must either disobey my orders, or disobey Acts of Parliament, which the admiral was disobeying. I determined upon the former, trusting to the uprightness of my intention, and believed that my country would not allow me to be ruined by protecting her commerce.*

The Admiralty ultimately upheld Nelson in his dispute with Hughes and the local civilian leaders, but his actions on *Boreas* had near-disastrous consequences for his prospects in the Royal Navy. His stubbornness had marked him at the Admiralty as a troublemaker—and that was not the whole of it. Nelson had also leveled troublesome accusations of fraud in the royal dockyards, and he faced censure from the king himself for his lax handling of Prince William—the future King William IV—when the prince was in the West Indies as captain of HMS *Pegasus*.

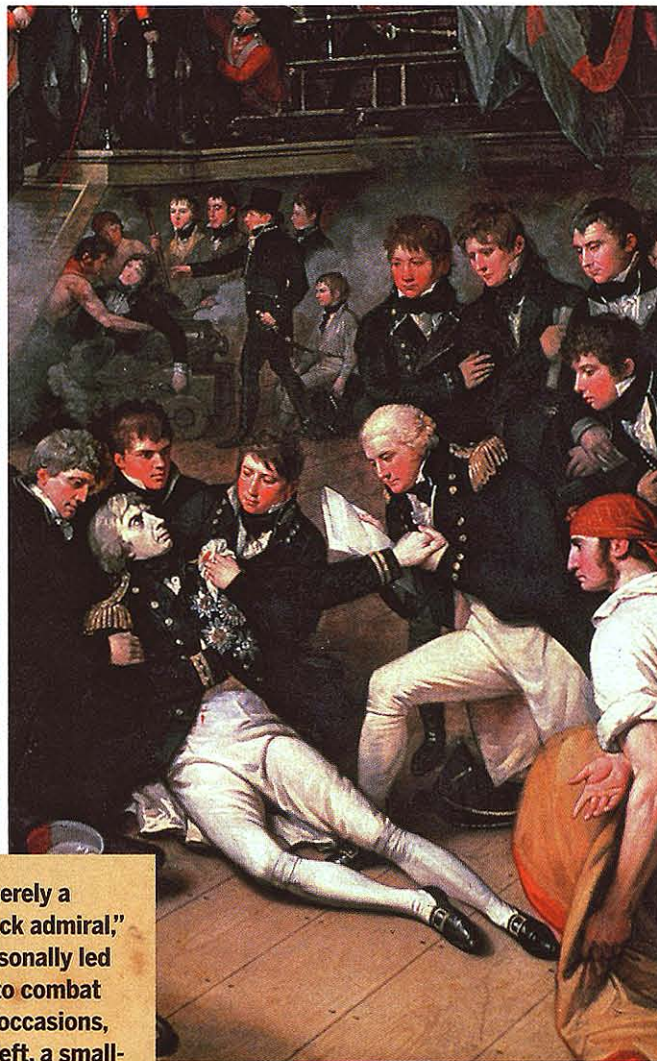
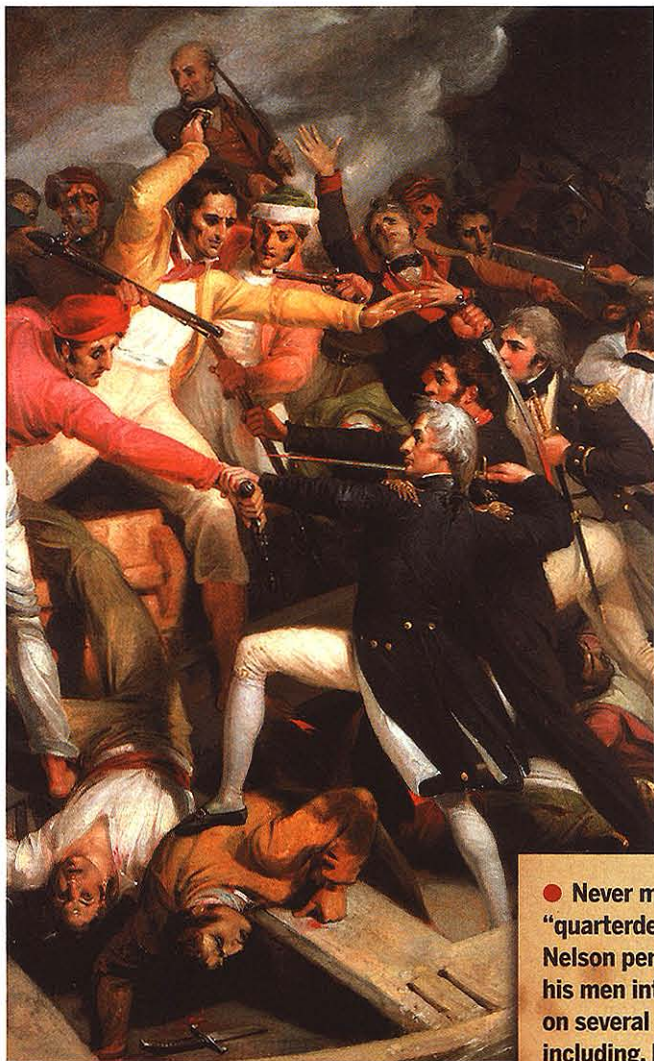
When Nelson returned to England and *Boreas* was paid off, he expected another assignment—perhaps something larger than a frigate—

but what he got instead from the Admiralty was more than five years of conspicuous neglect. It became clear while Nelson was "beached" that he had fallen far out of favor with those who controlled his naval future. Such senior officers as Admiral Lord Richard Howe and Admiral Lord Samuel Hood, men Nelson had previously considered his supporters, were now indifferent to his efforts to gain another sea command.

**T**oward the end of this period ashore Nelson even considered leaving the Royal Navy, but in 1793 the Admiralty suddenly named him to command of the 64-gun ship of the line HMS *Agamemnon*. In January 1793 he wrote wife Fanny from London:



**“To serve my king,  
and to destroy  
the French, I consider  
as the great order  
of all from which  
little ones spring;  
and if one of  
these little ones  
militates against it  
...I go back to obey  
the great order”**



LEFT: RICHARD WESTALL / NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, LONDON. GREENWICH HOSPITAL COLLECTION. RIGHT: BENJAMIN WEST / © WALKER ART GALLERY, NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL, THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

● Never merely a “quarterdeck admiral,” Nelson personally led his men into combat on several occasions, including, left, a small-boat attack in 1797 on Spanish ships in Cadiz harbor. His luck ran out at Trafalgar on Oct. 21, 1805, when a French sniper found his mark. Nelson died soon after.

*Post nubila phoebus—after clouds comes sunshine. The Admiralty so smile upon me that really I am as much surprised as when they frowned. [First Lord of the Admiralty] Lord Chatham yesterday made many apologies for not having given me a ship before this time and said that if I chose to take a 64 to begin with, I should be appointed to one as soon as she was ready.*

Nelson had put his career on the line to do what he thought was right and had survived in the Royal Navy. By accepting him back into the fold, the Admiralty had validated Nelson's willingness to risk his career by defining his duty in his own terms, and his actions bore out that validation repeatedly throughout the balance of his career.

In illuminating the basis of Nelson's greatness, we must consider an additional factor, one outside of the admiral himself: Jervis, 1st Earl of St. Vincent, Nelson's “anchor to windward.” From the Battle of Cape St. Vincent in 1797, when Nelson demonstrated exceptional courage and a willingness to take initiative that could have ended his career,

the earl loomed large. From his positions of influence at the Admiralty, St. Vincent not only protected Nelson from those who appreciated neither his unflagging aggressiveness nor his willingness to “interpret” his orders, but also ensured that Nelson received key assignments. Indeed, were it not for the earl's ongoing support, Nelson would never have achieved the level of greatness he did.

When all is said and done, Nelson's status as arguably the greatest of all naval leaders only *begins* with his achievements in the strategically important Battles of the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar. It is the core elements of his character—particularly his combat doctrine and willingness to put his career on the line to achieve victory—that are most relevant. And it is those key elements of character that corroborate Mahan's assessment of Nelson as “a great force ... concrete in a single man.” **MH**

*For further reading Joseph F. Callo recommends his own Nelson Speaks, as well as Nelson: The Admiral, by Colin White, and The Life of Nelson, by Alfred Thayer Mahan.*