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HM Schooner *Pickle*: a Little Vessel of Colossal Importance

by Rear Admiral Joseph Callo, USN (Ret.)

COURTESY GORDON FRICKERS

"I Have Urgent Dispatches"
by Gordon Frickers.

As a two-masted, topsail vessel, HM Schooner *Pickle* was so small that it could not serve in the line of battle at Cape Trafalgar, on the fateful 21st of October 1805. In fact, a single broadside from any ship of the line in that violent struggle between the Royal Navy and the combined fleets of France and Spain could have destroyed *Pickle*. As a result, during the Battle of Trafalgar, *Pickle* served as a utility vessel, carrying out such lowly duties as picking up survivors from ships sunk during the violent action.

Nevertheless, the schooner's special moment in history came shortly after the smoke of the Battle of Trafalgar dispersed and it became clear that Admiral Horatio Nelson had achieved a history-making victory. At that point *Pickle,* under the command of the undistinguished Lieutenant John Lapenotière, was designated to bring the news of one of the greatest sea battles in history back to England.

Pickle was built in Bermuda and named *Sting* before being taken into the Royal Navy in 1800. The mini-warship was seventy-three feet in length, with a beam of a little less than twenty-one feet. Her main armament was eight 12-pound carronades, and she carried a crew of about forty. *Pickle's* copper bottom kept the small ship's below-the-waterline surface clear of barnacles and other marine growth, significantly adding to her speed.

Notwithstanding her speed, *Pickle* was exceptionally seaworthy. The latter

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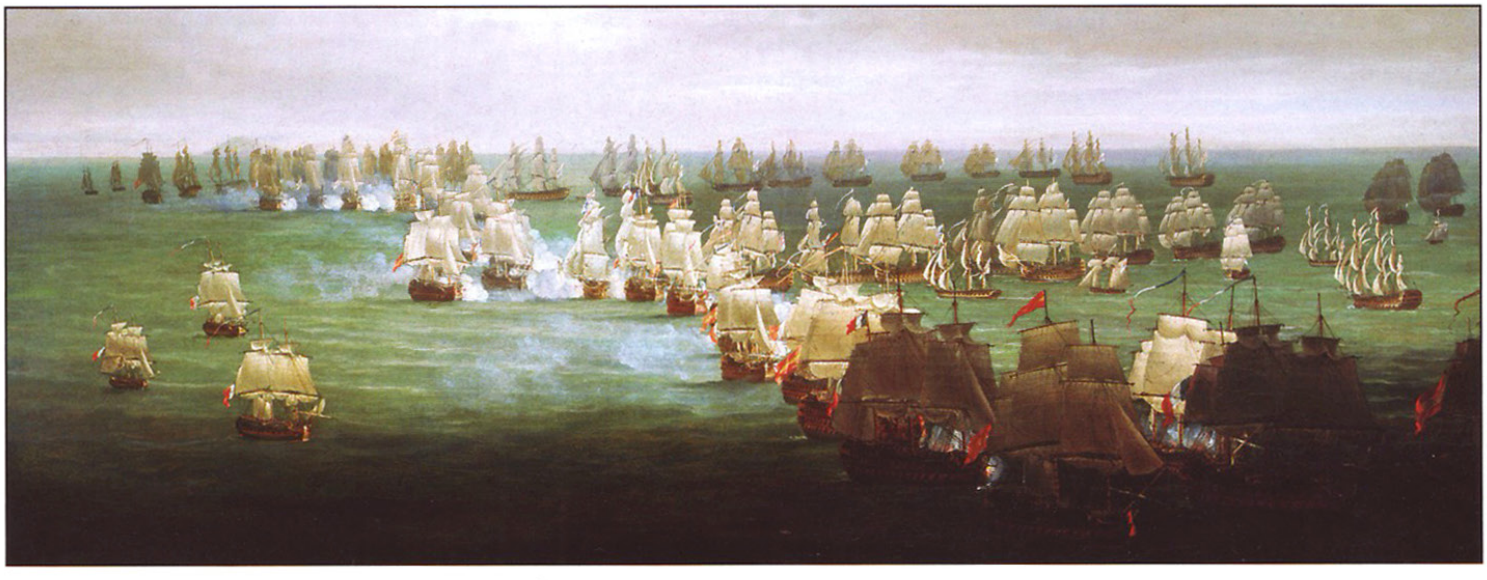
This painting, taken from a James Leakey miniature, is believed to be a portrait of Royal Navy Lieutenant John Lapenotière.



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The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805: Beginning of the Action *by Nicholas Pocock (1740–1821)*

feature was of particular importance for this mission transiting the 1,000 miles of storm-laced ocean that Lapenotière and his crew faced in the race to get the news of the crucial Trafalgar victory to London.

The momentous message from Admiral Sir Cuthbert Collingwood, who had followed Nelson in command of the British fleet after Nelson's death, began, "The ever to be lamented death of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, who, in the late conflict with the enemy, fell in the hour of victory...." Collingwood then went on to describe Nelson's stunning triumph over the combined French-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar. It was Collingwood's dispatch that was entrusted to Captain Lapenotière and the little schooner for delivery to the British leaders at Whitehall, and indeed the entire British nation.

After an unusually stormy nine-day passage, *Pickle* and Lapenotière arrived at Falmouth on 4 November 1805. From Falmouth, the captain raced by horse-drawn coach to London, where he delivered his history-shaping news in the early morning hours of 6 November. At the crucial moment, he burst into the Admiralty Board Room with his dispatch from Collingwood and proclaimed to First Secretary of the Admiralty Sir William Marsden, who was holding a candle aloft and on his way to bed: "Sir, we have gained a great victory, but we have lost Lord Nelson."

In 1974 a group of warrant officers and chief petty officers in the Royal Navy, mindful of the wardroom's annual "Trafalgar Night" Dinners, decided that the officers "should not have all the fun." The result was the establishment of a "Pickle Night" event in early November, approximately a week after the traditional October 21st Trafalgar Night dinners.

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Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, 1758–1805 *by Lemuel Francis Abbott (1760–1802)*

Then in 2004, an ad hoc group in New York decided to have a Pickle Night Dinner in the United States. The initiators of the New York City Pickle Night Dinner had two objectives in mind: to explore the relevance of Admiral Nelson's career to present times, and to reinforce the importance of the special relationship between the US Navy and the Royal Navy. The venue each year—for what has become a tradition in its own right—has been the unique New York Yacht Club in mid-town Manhattan. ⚓

Joe Callo is an award-winning author and network television producer/writer who has written extensively on Great Britain's Admiral Lord Nelson. He served for 32 years in the US Navy Reserve and is an overseer of the National Maritime Historical Society.

Save the Date! New York City Pickle Night Dinner

9 November 2018 at the New York Yacht Club

This year marks the 213th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, and the 14th New York City Pickle Night Dinner will mark this history-shaping event on Friday, 9 November 2018. Those who appreciate the historical significance of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson and the lore associated with his life are invited to attend this special event. The dinner is named for HM Schooner *Pickle,* which participated in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and which brought the news to Britain of Nelson's victory and death in the battle. This event has been a perennial success, with guests from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Switzerland, and elsewhere. This year's keynote speaker is Vice Admiral Tony Radakin, Royal Navy, Second Sea Lord. Space is limited. For reservations contact Sally McElwreath Callo, SallyMC79@verizon.net; Ph. 212 972-8667.