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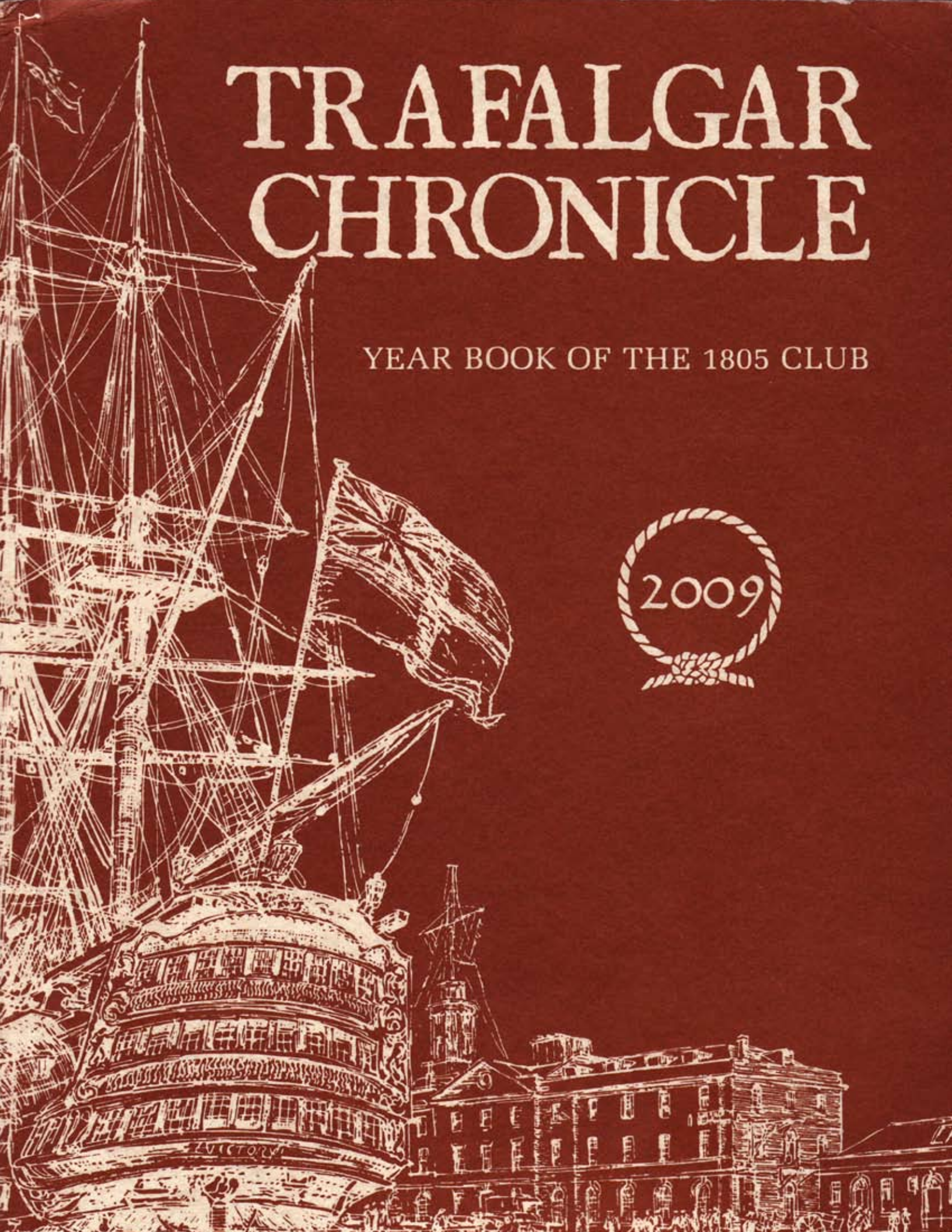

The Battle of Santa Cruz: A Critical Transition

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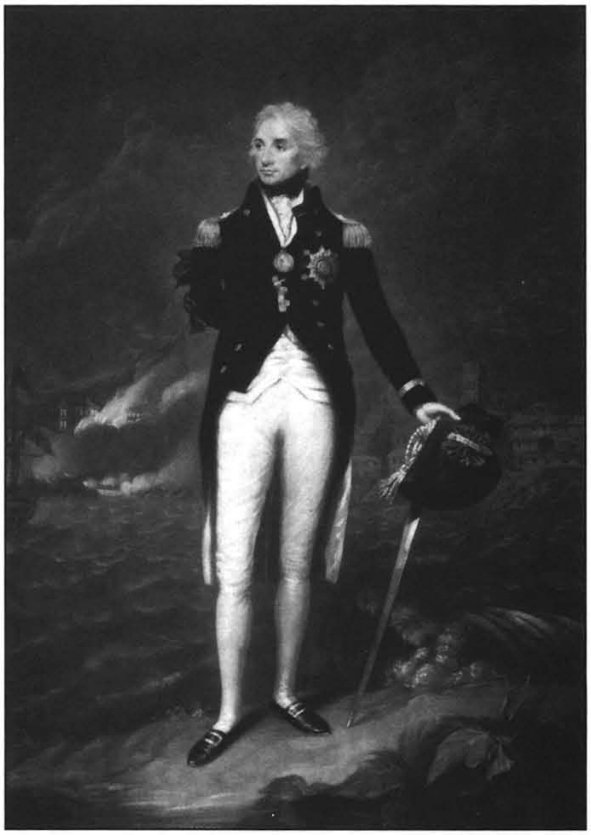
The Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in July 1797 was a crushing defeat for Admiral Lord Nelson. The 'butcher's bill' for the action told the story: 251 British sailors and Marines killed, wounded, drowned, or missing and the cutter HMS *Fox* sunk. In addition, Nelson lost his right arm and very nearly his life. Following his defeat at Santa Cruz, Nelson took his squadron northeast from the Canary Islands, toward Cadiz and the main British fleet. He was sure his career was over. Yet when one gets beyond the basic narrative of the events, the Battle of Santa Cruz emerges as a paradoxically affirmative turning point for the man who shaped history from the quarterdecks of his ships.



Rear Admiral Horatio Nelson, Mezzotint engraving after Lemuel Abbott. The town of Santa Cruz, Tenerife is seen in flames in the background. Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.

On the Crest of a Wave

The first seven months of 1797 had been good for Nelson. In February while commanding the 74-gun HMS *Captain* at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, he demonstrated his exceptional physical courage and tactical skills. At a crucial point in the engagement, he unhesitatingly risked his life and his career with a bold maneuver that was not specifically ordered by his commander-in-chief, Admiral Sir John Jervis. He turned out of the British line-ahead

formation and sailed directly into the Spanish fleet that Jervis was seeking to engage. In so doing Nelson blocked the escape of the Spanish and precipitated the action Jervis sought.

As a result of his initiative and courage in the close combat, plus his own efforts at self-promotion that followed the Battle, the unique popularity among the British public that helped support Nelson's career was launched. Of equal importance he gained a powerful mentor in Jervis, who understood and appreciated Nelson's achievements as a warfighter at Cape St. Vincent. In writing about Nelson's initial action at the Battle, which has been consistently described by naval historians as disobedience to his commander's orders, noted author and historian Colin White chose to focus on the important relationship between Nelson and Jervis. He wrote: 'So, "disobedience" is not an appropriate word to describe Nelson's action: it is more helpful to see it as another demonstration of the remarkable degree of understanding and trust which had been established between the two men'.[1]

Shortly after the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, Nelson was knighted and advanced to rear admiral. Then in May he was ordered to shift his rear admiral's flag to HMS *Theseus*, like *Captain* a 74-gun ship-of-the-line. In *Theseus* Nelson commanded the British inshore squadron blockading the port of Cadiz. Like many British blockades at the time, there were dual objectives: applying economic pressure and driving the enemy's naval forces out of their anchorage and into battle.

Rear Admiral Nelson's Conflict in a Barge off Cadiz, July 1797. Copper engraving after William Westall. Courtesy the author.

Although blockade duty seldom provided opportunities for the building of a public image, the hero of the Battle of Cape St. Vincent managed to generate at least one such opportunity on 4 July. The incident that enhanced his burgeoning reputation with the British public, the

Admiralty, and Whitehall was a boat action off Cadiz that involved hand-to-hand fighting. Nelson had been in his barge, helping to position a bomb vessel within range of Cadiz harbor, when Spanish gunboats attempted to thwart the British effort. A melee ensued, during which he came close to being cut down by a sword on several occasions. Two years later he described the event to one of his first biographers John McArthur as 'a service hand-to-hand with swords, in which my coxswain, John Sykes, now no more, twice saved my life'.[2] Eventually the British succeeded in bombarding the town and harbor with considerable effect, but by mid-July, it was clear that the Spanish fleet was not coming out of Cadiz at any point soon. Nelson's inshore squadron was returned to Admiral Jervis' main fleet.

For Honour and More

The serious idea for an attack on Santa Cruz probably began to surface in early March, when Nelson was detached for a short period with a small squadron to intercept a Spanish ship carrying gold from Cuba to Spain. Nothing came of the search for the treasure ship, but British scouting frigates reported the presence in Santa Cruz of a vessel that could have been the one for which Nelson and his squadron had been searching. In addition, Royal Navy frigates had recently succeeded in cutting out individual ships in Santa Cruz harbor, the most recent being a French corvette *La Mutine*.

In a letter to Admiral Jervis of 12 April, Nelson mentioned a discussion the previous night with his friend of many years Captain Thomas Troubridge and went on to say: 'I have endeavoured to make myself master of the situation and means of approach by sea and land'.[3] He then launched into the details that would be involved in an attack on Santa Cruz. The plan Nelson was developing was an eighteenth-century version of modern expeditionary warfare, and its potential strategic benefits were too tempting to resist.

A successful assault from the sea against Santa Cruz would roil an important Spanish colony and threaten one of her crucial sea lines of communication. In the process a considerable amount of national wealth would be diverted from Spain to Great Britain. The latter factor also had immense personal implications for those who might successfully carry out the plan, since the prize money from such an achievement would make them extraordinarily wealthy. The letter of 12 April to Admiral Jervis discussed the terrain, how the Spanish moored their ships, the naval force, troops and special equipment

that would be necessary, previous successful assaults against Santa Cruz, problems that could be faced, and even the economic impact of redirecting such a large amount of Spanish treasure to Great Britain. On the latter point Nelson suggested to his commander that the proposed attack 'has every prospect of raising our Country to a higher pitch of wealth than she ever yet attained'.[4] And at the end of the letter he added an interesting protestation: 'But I know with you, and I can lay my hand on my heart and say the same- it is the honour and prosperity of our Country that we wish to extend'.[5]

Like many plans, Nelson's looked good in theory. Admiral Jervis approved, and on 14 July he gave Nelson orders to take Santa Cruz and negotiate for the treasure presumed to be there. For good measure, Jervis also ordered him 'to take, sink, burn, or otherwise destroy, all Vessels of every description, even those employed in the Fishery, on the coast of Africa, unless a just contribution is made for their preservation by the inhabitants of the Canary Islands'.[6]

Based on the significant potential of the plan, Jervis provided Nelson with a powerful squadron consisting of three 74-gun ships-of-the-line (HMS *Theseus*, HMS *Culloden*, and HMS *Zealous*), three frigates (HMS *Emerald*, HMS *Seahorse*, and HMS *Terpsichore*), a cutter (HMS *Fox*) and a mortar vessel. As far as the ships were concerned, Nelson could not have asked for more, but the ground force was another matter. His plan anticipated a need for several thousand troops, but unfortunately neither British Army commander in the theater was willing to join the project. At that point Nelson made his first and perhaps most egregious mistake; he convinced Jervis that, lacking the army troops, he could carry out his plan with a naval force, augmented by a relatively small number of Royal Marines.

Nelson's overconfidence was a mistake born in his overestimation of his own and his fellow captains' abilities, and it was magnified by an equally serious underestimation of the Spanish General he would face at Santa Cruz, Don Antonio Gutiérrez. In the latter case, he was acting contrary to the wisdom of the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: 'The fortunes of war flow this way and that, and no prudent fighter holds his enemy in contempt'.[7] Nelson's hubris oozes from between the lines of a letter he wrote to his wife Fanny on 11 July:

> *My Late Affair here (the Battle of Cape St. Vincent) will not, I believe, lower me in the opinion of the world. I have had flattery enough to make me vain, and success enough to make me confident.*[8]

On several other occasions his correspondence reflected the unmistakable conviction that his plan could not fail.

On 21 July Nelson's squadron hove to as it neared the Canary Islands, and he gathered his captains for a final conference. Approximately 900 sailors and Marines in the landing force were transferred by small boats to the three frigates, and the frigates were then sent ahead for the initial landing, which was planned for the early hours of the following day. Nelson gave the frigates a three-hour start and then followed with the rest of his force, which would support the troops ashore with bombardment.

The First Attacks

Nelson arrived off Santa Cruz at about 04:30 on the 22nd, and he found that nature had already intervened in his meticulous planning. The landing party, led by Captain Troubridge, was confronting extremely rough seas and the strong offshore winds of the seasonal 'alisios' that blow in the Canary Islands during the spring and summer. The boats carrying the assault force should have been ashore and the troops deployed by that time, but they were still more than a mile from the beach. The benefit of surprise had been lost and General Gutiérrez had time to begin deploying his forces, which consisted of 400 regular army soldiers, 110 French sailors who had been left behind when *La Mutine* was cut out, and 700 local militiamen who rallied to meet the emergency. The General also had somewhat fewer than 400 gunners, about half the number needed to serve the artillery he had in the area.

Nelson's original plan was to take the fort at the Castillo de Paso Alto, which was about five miles along the coast and to the north of Santa Cruz, rather than the heavily defended port itself. From that position he planned to threaten to attack and raze Santa Cruz, unless the town's defenders met his terms. The principal elements of those terms were 'the immediate surrender of the Ship El Principe d'Asturias ... together with her whole and entire cargo; and also such other cargoes and such property as may have been landed in the Island of Teneriffe, and not intended for the consumption of its Inhabitants'.[9]

Unfortunately by the time Troubridge had struggled ashore, organized his forces, traversed the extremely difficult terrain, and attacked the Castillo, Gutiérrez had been able to begin reinforcing its defenders. It was the first

indication of the General's ability to manoeuvre his forces to meet the British at their points of attack. The action was heavy, but a determined assault might have taken the fort. At that point, however, Troubridge withdrew the assault force and returned the men and equipment to the ships.

After another conference aboard *Theseus*, a modified plan was formulated: seize the high ground behind the Castillo and then attack it from the rear. The boats landed for a second time and after struggling through extremely difficult terrain, the assault force, again led by Captain Troubridge, reached a position behind the Castillo But the artillery fire from the fort made the British position untenable, and once again Troubridge led the landing force back to the ships. By then his force had been mauled by the Spanish guns and exhausted by the terrain, heat, and debilitating thirst.

After the two unsuccessful attacks on the Castillo de Paso Alto the weather again intervened, and on 23 July gale winds forced Nelson to devote his full attention to keeping his squadron from being scattered or driven ashore. As the weather subsided, yet another captains' conference was called. By now reality had set in, and just before the final attack on 24 July Nelson wrote to Jervis:

> *[A]ll has hitherto been done which was possible, but without effect: this night I, humble as I am, command the whole, destined to land under the batteries of the Town, and to-morrow my head will probably be crowned either with laurel or cypress.*[11]

Two factors contributed to the decision to make a final, all-or-nothing try. The first was Nelson's pride, which at this point had displaced his confidence. In his after-action report, he said: 'I considered it for the honour of our King and Country not to give over the attempt to possess ourselves of the Town, that our enemies might be convinced there is nothing which Englishmen are not equal to'. The second was false intelligence brought to the squadron by a deserter from Santa Cruz. The deserter claimed that the city's defenses were weak and disorganized.

The defenses were in fact the opposite, and despite the fact that he was fighting a defensive battle, General Gutiérrez was able to anticipate each attack made by Nelson. The way in which the British attacks were met by the defenders illuminates Nelson's lack of accurate, real-time intelligence. It was a planning flaw that negated his audacity and the courage of his men. It would turn out to be the tipping point in the Battle.

The Final Attack

The third and final attack was aimed directly at the centre of the enemy's strength. The assault force would attack at or close to the mole that extended into the harbor from the center of the town, take that position and the Castillo San Cristóbal at the landward end of the mole and proceed from there. It was a bold plan, influenced no doubt by Nelson's belief, which was applied successfully on numerous occasions during his later career, that the boldest measures are also the safest measures.

Nelson divided his landing force into six units; he led one, and each of the other units was led by one of his captains, including Troubridge, Miller, Waller, Hood, and Thompson. A reserve of 200 men in *Fox* was to remain just off shore. Once again Nelson lacked the advantage of surprise and by the time the boats neared shore they were exposed to deadly cannon and musket fire from strategically placed positions along the shore. Nelson's and Thompson's units landed on a small beach a few yards to the north of the mole. The units led by Troubridge, Miller, Waller, and Hood all struggled ashore somewhat to the south of the mole on rocky and otherwise awkward bits of shoreline that made debarking troops and equipment extremely difficult.

From the start the British were in desperate straits. Those from Nelson's and Thompson's units who managed to reach the mole were decimated by withering fire, and one of the early casualties was Nelson, whose right elbow was shattered by a musket ball as he was stepping out of his boat.[12] Nelson's stepson, Josiah Nisbet, was one of the junior officers in Nelson's unit and he undoubtedly saved his stepfather's life by quickly applying a tourniquet to the shattered arm and then getting him back to *Theseus*. There the ship's surgeon amputated Nelson's right arm above the elbow.

Shortly after Nelson was wounded, *Fox*, with the British reserve force still on board, was holed at the waterline by cannon fire and sank. Nelson, who was at that point being rowed back to *Theseus*, insisted that the boat pick up survivors from *Fox*. At the mole, things continued to go badly, and with the sinking of *Fox* there would be no reserve force to influence the outcome.

The units led by Captains Troubridge, Miller, Waller, and Hood had with great difficulty made it to shore south of the town. As they moved through the narrow streets, they were continuously confronted by defenders, who seemed to be able to constantly position themselves in front of the attackers. The fragmented British force eventually managed to come together perhaps a half mile inland

from the mole, at the Convento de Santo Domingo, a large, square structure that provided a strong defensive position for the now besieged attackers.

Under the leadership of Captain Troubridge, a final, desperate tactic was formulated, and with a flag of truce, a message was sent to General Gutiérrez with a demand: surrender the town or it will be put to the torch. The General called Troubridge's bluff, and by the morning of 25 July the action was over. Gutiérrez was generous in his surrender terms: the British must leave without further threats against any of the Canary Islands; the attackers could leave with full military honours, including their arms.

In the Battle's immediate aftermath, the British were treated as worthy adversaries by General Gutiérrez and the entire town. Bread and wine were provided to the assault force, the wounded were treated in local hospitals, and boats were provided to return the British to their ships. In an interesting sidelight to the Battle, Gutiérrez, with the intention of discouraging future attacks, planted a bit of disinformation with the British captains by leading them to believe that there were 8,000 Spanish troops on Tenerife. Many historical accounts of the Battle actually use that erroneous figure in describing the Spanish order of battle.

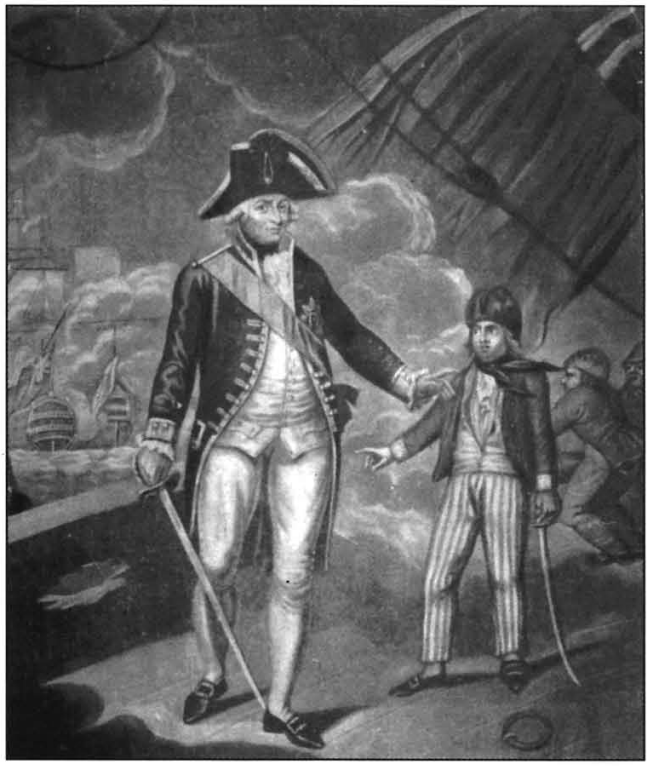
The Aftermath

It's hard to imagine how troubled Nelson's state of mind was on 26 July. He was confronted with 'the world turned upside down'. After the remarkable surges in his self-esteem after the Battle of Cape St. Vincent and the actions off Cadiz, he was coping with a stunning defeat and a near-fatal wound. One of the first mitigating factors for Nelson was General Gutiérrez, who treated those he had defeated with both respect and compassion. In the times of conflict between Great Britain and Spain that followed, Nelson invariably dealt with the Spanish as honourable adversaries, a sharp contrast with his contempt for Napoleon and the French republican forces led by the Emperor.

Before leaving Santa Cruz, Nelson exchanged notes with General Gutiérrez. There was no arrogance on the Spaniard's part, and Nelson's note reflected his gratitude for the treatment of his men. It was an exchange between warfighters, both of whom understood the need for humanity in the aftermath of combat, despite the violence of their profession. And the hours immediately after the Battle of Santa Cruz constituted a time for such

humanity. On 27 July, Nelson and his squadron departed Santa Cruz, and on 16 August they were back at Cadiz and under the direct control of their commander-in-chief. During the period of the Santa Cruz operation, Jervis had been created Earl St. Vincent.

Nelson was in considerable pain and was deeply depressed. There was, however, some consolation. Despite the fact that the defeat at Santa Cruz reflected negatively on his own judgment, the Earl never tried to shift the blame for the debacle onto Nelson. And when Nelson wrote despondently to the Earl reporting the details of his defeat, his commander-in-chief struck exactly the right note. He didn't lecture Nelson, but he also provided no excuse for self-pity. The tone was that of one naval officer to another:



Brave Admiral Jervis, mezzotint engraving, circa 1797. Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.

> *Mortals cannot command success; you and your Companions have certainly deserved it, by the greatest degree of heroism and perseverance that ever was exhibited.*[13]

The letter went on to talk of the preliminaries of peace with Spain and the progress of Nelson's stepson Josiah and then included regards for Betsy Fremantle who was embarked in her husband's ship HMS *Seahorse*. Lord St. Vincent ended his letter with a light note and a bit of grotesque black humour that would have forced a wry smile to Nelson's face: 'I will salute her and bow to your stump to-morrow morning, if you will give me leave'.[14] The admiral's tone would have provided a necessary brake on Nelson's depression. It was a noteworthy example of the importance of an admiral's *behavior*, a classic instance of not just doing the right thing, but of doing it in a manner that strengthens the impact of the action.

Healing the Body and the Spirit

On 20 August, Nelson struck his flag in *Theseus* and transferred to *Seahorse* for his return to England, along with many of the wounded from Santa Cruz. Foul winds and pain from his amputation were his constant companions, and the Nelson who stepped ashore in Portsmouth on 1 September was a very different man from the one who had covered himself with glory at Cape St. Vincent and the boat action off Cadiz. His cheeks were sunken, his hair had turned white, and of course he was missing his right arm. But in terms of spirit, Nelson was already on the way back from the despair of his defeat.

If his liberal treatment at the hands of General Gutiérrez had been the first step in his recovery process and the reaction of the Earl St. Vincent had been the second, a third was provided by the people of Portsmouth. Nelson wrote to St. Vincent about how his countrymen had welcomed him: 'My general reception from John Bull has been just what I wished for'.[15] During September and October, Nelson, in the constant care of his wife Fanny, sought medical attention. His wound did not seem to be healing and his pain was incessant. Finally in December nature took its course; the ligature that had been used by *Theseus*' surgeon to bind the wound came free and the pain dissipated.

The Final Reckoning

There were some surprising results of the events of 21-24 July 1797 at Santa Cruz. Nelson had proposed the mission to his commander-in-chief, done the planning, and led the operation. Yet no one seemed to blame him for the disaster, not St. Vincent, not the King, and certainly not the British public. In fact Nelson's career momentum not only didn't suffer, it actually accelerated. Even the citizens of Santa Cruz accorded him a startling exoneration by naming a boulevard in their city, not in honour of General Gutiérrez, the victor at the Battle of Santa Cruz, but in honour of the man who had attacked them and been defeated: Admiral Lord Nelson!

There was also a uniquely personal by-product of the Battle for Nelson. The period during his recovery was probably the happiest period of his marriage. Fanny was needed by her husband, and he was quite free in expressing genuine gratitude for her care. In addition, he was with her rather than at sea performing the acts of daring that kept her in desperate fear of being widowed.

Arguably the most important result of the Battle was, however, that Nelson was cured of the dangerous overconfidence that infected his judgement leading up to Santa Cruz. He was not yet forty years old, although he looked older, and the most important years of his career were ahead. In fact, he would soon be selected for a most important assignment as commander-in-chief of Britain's Mediterranean Fleet. Ahead of him lay the history-shaping Battles of the Nile in 1798, Copenhagen in 1801, and his final triumph at Trafalgar in 1805.

Coinciding with Nelson's sudden recovery from the loss of his arm, an anonymous note was delivered to St. George's Church on South Audley Street, Hanover Square, London, a few steps from Nelson's and Fanny's lodging on Bond Street. The unsigned note read: 'An Officer desires to return Thanks to Almighty God for his perfect recovery from a severe Wound, and also for the many mercies bestowed on him'.[16] There was no sign of hubris in that succinct communication.

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[1] Colin White, *1799 Nelson's Year of Destiny* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1998) special note, 'The Significance of Nelson's action', p. 58.

[2] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London: Chatham Publishing, 1997), ii, p. 405, note 6.

[3] Ibid., p. 379.

[4] Ibid., p. 380.

[5] Ibid., p. 381.

[6] Ibid., p. 413, note 2.

[7] Colonel Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 1966), p. 123.

[8] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London: Chatham Publishing, 1997), ii, p. 412.

[9] Ibid. , p. 419.

[10] Ibid., p. 421.

[11] Ibid., p. 425.

[12] The British were sure that it was a musket ball that struck Nelson, but the Spanish attributed Nelson wound to grapeshot from a cannon nicknamed 'El Tigre'. The cannon is exhibited in Tenerife's naval museum, along with captured battle flags and other artifacts from the Battle of Santa Cruz.

[13] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London: Chatham Publishing, 1997), ii, p. 435, note 7.

[14] Ibid., p. 436, note 7.

[15] Ibid., pp. 445-46.

[16] Ibid., p. 455.