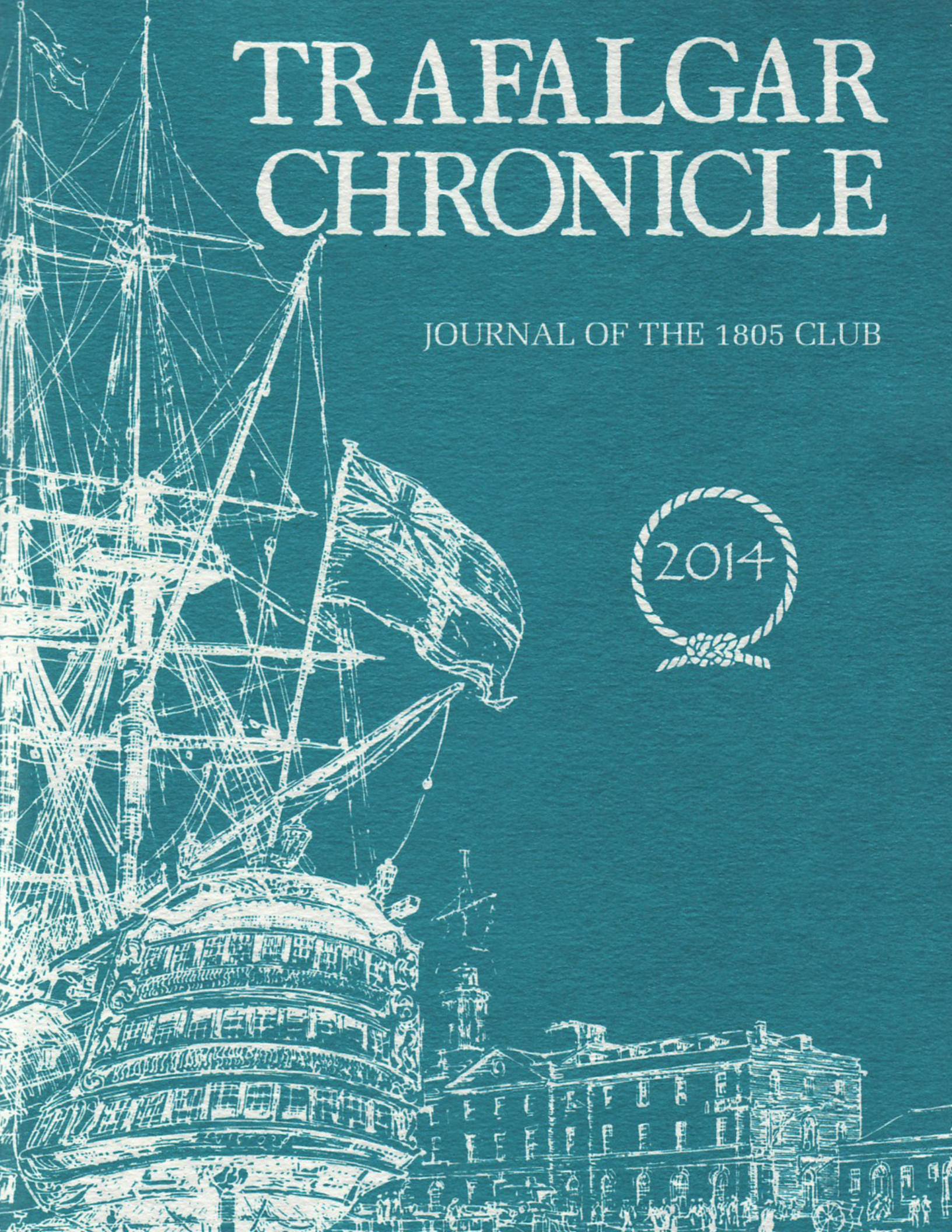


TRAFALGAR CHRONICLE

JOURNAL OF THE 1805 CLUB



Seeking the Hidden Nelson

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Admiral Lord Nelson shaped the course of history from the quarterdecks of his ships, and countless books, articles, films and television dramas have been written about him. He was a mega-hero in Great Britain in his own time, and it's possible that he is the world's most lauded naval officer of the last two hundred-plus years. For example, in 1897 American sea power prophet then-Captain A.T. Mahan wrote:

There were, indeed, consequences momentous and stupendous yet to flow from the decisive supremacy of Great Britain's sea-power, the establishment of which, beyond all question or competition, was Nelson's great achievement....He needed, and he left, no successor.¹

More than a century later, Fleet Street Journalist Tom Pocock was brilliantly concise, and in some ways more profound, when he wrote that Nelson was 'Superman with Everyman's weaknesses'.² When writing about Nelson, author and former Director of the National Museum of the Royal Navy at Portsmouth Colin White wrote thoughtfully about Nelson's 'intensely emotional, even spiritual, approach to his profession'.³ In *To Rule the Waves*, American author Arthur Herman recently wrote about what those who followed Nelson in the Royal Navy thought: 'His every action and command would be studied and hailed as inspired genius, his every word treated as Holy Writ'.⁴ No matter how perceptive each observer may be, however, one continues to be left with the feeling that there always is more – much more – to be revealed about the parson's son who, as Mahan wrote, 'left no successor'.

Noted Nelson enthusiast and bookseller of naval and maritime works Michael Nash addressed the challenge of getting beyond the Nelson we have come to know, when he wrote in the foreword of a recent book *Nelson Speaks*:

We stand too close to the flame, the more we look the less we see. Our vision of Nelson has become blurred and our senses dulled by a myriad of pre-conceived, hero-worshipping, over-familiar images.⁵

Happily Nash goes on to suggest an antidote to the problem when he proposes that we look more attentively at what Nelson says about himself. And Nelson did after all signal the special value of his words when he wrote to his uncle, William Suckling in 1787: 'But what I have said is the inward monitor of my heart upon every difficult occasion'.⁶ That 'inward monitor' often leads us beyond the events reflexively addressed by biographers and navalists to subject areas that illuminate new and provocative views of Nelson's persona.

Beyond Tactics

When analyzing Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, many authors refer to his tactic of breaking the enemy's traditional line-ahead formation. While this was an important factor in the victory, there was something even more important – and less noticed – that was at work on 21 October 1805. That something was Nelson's combat doctrine, which can be defined as the ultimate guide to action when the chaos of battle overtakes even the most thorough tactical planning. A combat doctrine generally is not articulated as such. It is an elusive, deeply-seated mind-set, which is transmitted by a leader's actions and attitude. It is an intangible that takes over when the horror of combat overwhelms rationality.

Nelson's memo to his captains of October 9 1805 is known for its detailed description of the tactics he was to use against the Combined French-Spanish Fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar. The memo is cited in many books about Nelson as the definitive portrayal of how Nelson won the Battle of Trafalgar. But towards the end of the document there were several simple, but deceptively important, lines that went beyond tactics:

*Something must be left to chance; nothing is sure in a Sea Fight...
But in case Signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood,
no Captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that
of an Enemy.*⁷

The message in those few lines was clear: we will fight and win this battle eye-ball-to-eye-ball, and that combat doctrine was ultimately unleashed when his signal to his fleet, 'Engage the enemy more closely', was hoisted. It was the final signal Nelson sent to his captains as they bore down on the enemy, and there was no expectation among his captains of further orders. They

knew their leader and they knew how he expected them to fight. The battle would be a pell-mell slugging match, and it was up to each captain to seek and destroy his nearest adversary.

Implicit in Nelson's combat doctrine was his complete trust in his captains, and that trust conceivably was at the core of the intensity of the men who--salvo-by-salvo and moment-by-moment--carried the day at Trafalgar. In the authoritative book, *Sea Power: A Naval History*, edited by U.S. World War II Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz and historian E.B. Potter, the authors elevated the importance of the memo of 9 October:

*This Memorandum is noteworthy especially for its spirit of aggressiveness, its trust of juniors, its simplicity, and its confidence in victory... The plan provided for flexibility and for the greatest freedom of action on the part of each captain.*⁸

A Veiled Dimension of Courage

The issue of disobedience to orders rises with considerable frequency in accounts of Nelson's life. One of the early examples involved his tour as commanding officer of HMS *Boreas* in the West Indies, from 1784-87. At the time he was the senior officer afloat in the theater, and as such he vigorously enforced Britain's Navigation Acts, which forbade direct trade between Britain's colonies and other nations.

Nelson's reporting senior in the theater, Admiral Sir Richard Hughes, ordered Nelson to leave the enforcement of the Navigation Acts to others. For their part Hughes, along with the local civilian authorities and plantation owners, chose to ignore the Navigation Acts. Their reason for doing so was simple: trade with the new country of America was important to the economic viability of the region. Nelson ignored Hughes' orders, however, and vigorously enforced the Acts, and contrasting views of his motivation are revealing.

In *Nelson's Letters from the Leeward Islands*, for example, Professor Michael Lewis characterizes *Boreas*' young captain in unflattering terms:

*Here, then, is a young Naval Officer, very keen, very ambitious, very proud of his Service; burning with patriotism; in a position of real authority for the first time; very sure that he is one-hundred-percent right.*⁹

If we turn to Nelson's words on the subject, however, we get a different perspective, that of an officer who is focused on honor and duty. On 9 January 1785, Nelson wrote to Admiral Hughes:

*Whilst I have the honour to command an English Man of War, I never shall allow myself to be subservient to the will of any Governor, nor co-operate with him in doing illegal acts... I know the Navigation Law.*¹⁰

Ten months later in a letter to British Secretary of State Lord Stanley, Boreas' captain put his honor and duty in a global economic perspective:

*We know that Commerce is the enricher of every Country: and where she flourishes most, that will be the greatest Country. I felt it my duty, and certainly it was my inclination, to preserve the Carrying Trade to our Country, as it encouraged British artificers, manufacturers, and seamen.*¹¹

Nelson's dispute with Admiral Hughes was an early example of his willingness to take political risks in order to do what he believed to be right and what he believed would meet the larger objective involved. As it turned out, the Admiralty eventually came down on Nelson's side, but not before his career had suffered significant short-term damage.

The theme of risking one's career politically by staying focused on primary objectives would resurface in a combat context. In 1797, when Nelson was in command of HMS *Captain*, he left the line-ahead formation of the British fleet at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, and he did so on his own initiative. Nelson's purpose was to cut off the Spanish fleet that was on the verge of escaping; he was focused on the main objective involved.

The result was an important victory for the British and an earldom for Admiral Jervis. When one of the other British captains complained to the Admiral that Nelson had disobeyed the admiral's order for a line-ahead formation, Jervis was unequivocal: '[I]f you ever commit such a breach of orders, I will forgive you also'.

The situation gave major impetus to Nelson's reputation for acting contrary to his orders, a reputation that made him unpopular among some of his fellow officers. The most important point is however, that his commander-in-chief praised Nelson's initiative and reinforced his inclination to 'interpret' his orders in terms of the situation at hand and the primary goal

involved, and it contradicted the idea that he was driven to disobey orders for reasons of pride or contrariness.

Perhaps Nelson's most important words on the subject were written to the Duke of Clarence on 9 November 1799. They expressed a basic way of thinking that puts Nelson's tendency to 'disobey' orders in a context that is simultaneously sweepingly broad and rationally simple.

To serve my King, and destroy the French, I consider as the great order for all, from which little ones spring; and if one of these little ones militate against it, (for, who can tell exactly at a distance?) I go back to obey the great order and object.¹²

The Underpinning of a Career

Nelson's seamanship does not get much attention, but it should. His connections with the sea obviously began at birth. The salt-laced Norfolk air he first breathed was his initial maritime connection, and that atmosphere shaped both the Norfolk landscape and the people who grew up in it. In that setting Nelson spent his childhood exploring the small harbors and inlets close to his Burnham Thorpe home, and those early experiences carried over. In 1799 Nelson told of his early experience in ships' boats:

[A]s my ambition was to be a seaman, it was always held out as a reward, that if I attended well to my navigation, I should go in the cutter and decked long boat, which was attached to the Commanding officer's ship at Chatham. Thus by degrees I became a good pilot, for vessels of that description, from Chatham to the Tower of London, down the Swin, and the North Foreland; and confident of myself amongst rocks and sands, which has many times since been of great comfort to me.¹³

Nelson's youthful experience in small boats gave a particular dimension to his seamanship, a special confidence that evidenced itself in his willingness to operate in uncharted areas where rocks and shoals were imminent hazards. That lack of fear of operating in littoral areas was particularly important at the Battles of the Nile and Copenhagen. And his acceptance of those risks extended to an encouragement of his captains to take the initiative, even in risky waters. In March 1805 Nelson demonstrated that support in a letter to the Admiralty on behalf of one of his captain's William

Layman, who had run aground off Cadiz. The captain had been court martialed and put at the bottom of his promotion list.

*I own myself one of those who do not fear the shore, for hardly any great things are done in a Small ship by a man that is, therefore, I make very great allowances for him (Layman). Indeed his station was intended never to be from the shore in the Straits: and if he did not every day risk his Sloop, he would be useless upon that station...You must, my dear Lord forgive the warmth which I express for Captain Layman: but he is in adversity, and, therefore, has the more claim to my attention and regard.*¹⁴

The fact that early in his career Nelson had sailed briefly in the merchant marine service was another noteworthy aspect of his seamanship that gets little attention, but that had a significant impact on his character. He knew life in the lower decks and the difficulties of the ordinary seaman on board ship. In October 1799, he wrote to then-contemporary naval author John M'Arthur about his time in the merchant service:

*[I]f I did not improve my education, I returned a practical seaman, with a horror of the Royal Navy, and with a saying then constant with the Seamen 'Aft the most honor, forward the better man'.*¹⁵

Nelson's understanding of the day-to-day difficulties of ordinary seamen surely was part of their loyalty to him, and that loyalty was never more important than in the stress of combat.

Nelson's seamanship was also enhanced by the sheer breadth of his naval experience. In the course of his career he operated in the Atlantic, Arctic, and Indian Oceans, as well as the Baltic, North and Caribbean Seas. There wasn't much he had not experienced at sea, and his ability to 'read' sea conditions to predict future weather circumstances came into play in the most important event of his career, the Battle of Trafalgar. Nelson interpreted the sea conditions as the battle progressed, and as he was dying in Trafalgar's cockpit, he repeatedly told *Victory's* captain to anchor at the end of the action. As a result, the damage to the British fleet from the fierce storm that followed the action was mitigated. If it was Nelson's combat doctrine that prevailed in the action at the Battle of Trafalgar, it was his seamanship that preserved the victory at Cape Trafalgar that influenced the course of history.

A Critical Turning Point

Aeschylus wrote, 'Wisdom comes through suffering'.¹⁶ And for Nelson his journey to wisdom began in earnest at the Battle of Santa Cruz in July 1797. His career to that point had been, on balance, on an upward swing, and the Battle of Cape St. Vincent in February 1797 established him as a public hero. Then, in quick succession he was created a Knight of the Bath and a rear admiral. Unfortunately the sharp rise in Nelson's career was followed immediately by hubris.

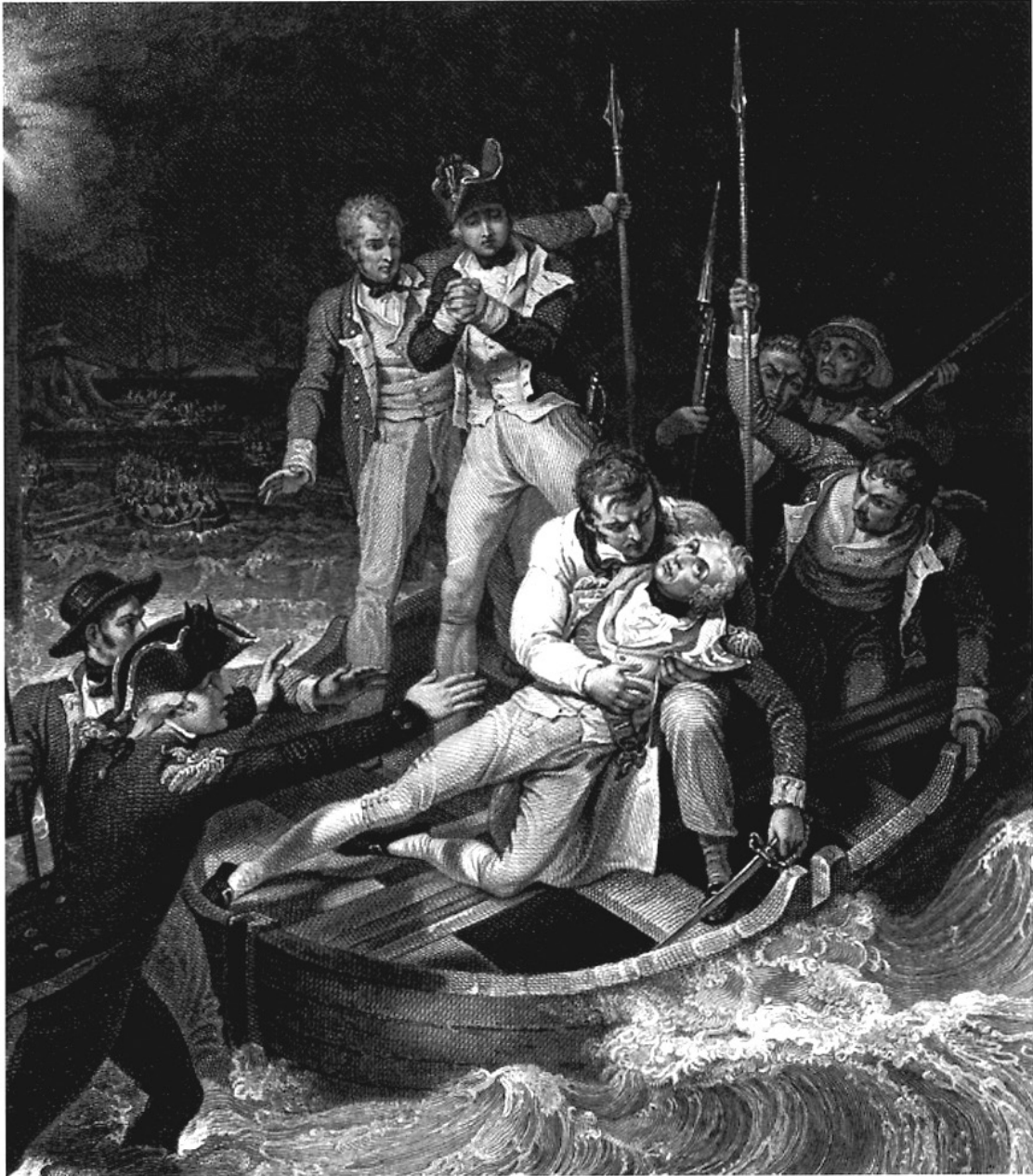
Five months after the events at Cape St. Vincent, Nelson was serving under the newly-raised Earl St. Vincent and planning an audacious mission to capture what was believed to be a Spanish treasure ship in Santa Cruz, Tenerife. There were major difficulties, however, that emerged in the planning and initial execution of the attack. Perhaps most important tactically was that an adequate ground attack force was never assembled, but Nelson nevertheless proceeded, using Royal Marines and seamen from the ships in his squadron as his landing force. Then the element of surprise, which would have possibly overcome the lack of a sufficient ground force, was lost because of weather conditions.

Clearly driven on by over confidence, Nelson pressed on with the attack, and the tactical problems continued to multiply, as the landing force struggled with the particularly difficult terrain along the shore. The ultimate vulnerability produced by Nelson's hubris was his underestimation of the leader of the Spanish forces defending the city, Spanish General Antonio Gutiérrez. In the end the Battle of Santa Cruz was a crushing defeat for Nelson. His force suffered heavy casualties and he lost his right arm.

Nelson's despondency after the defeat is reflected in his letter to Admiral Sir John Jervis from HMS *Theseus* in July 1797:

*I am become a burthen to my friends, and useless to my country...When I leave your command, I become dead to the World; I go hence, and am no more seen...I hope you will be able to give me a frigate, to convey the remains of my carcase (sic) to England.*¹⁷

In the tradition of Greek mythology, Nelson had been punished severely for his pride. Fortunately St. Vincent was able to overcome Nelson's despondency, and his protégée went on to serve his king and country well in their ongoing struggle against France and Napoleon. The blinding pride that was evident in the months before the Battle of Santa Cruz and Nelson's



'Sir Horatio Nelson when wounded at Teneriffe, night of 24 July 1797', engraved by John Neagle in 1809 after a painting by Richard Westall in 1806. Private Collection.

despondency following the defeat were replaced by a more realistic balance between ego and an understanding that events were not totally in his hands.

The change in Nelson was evident at his three great victories at the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar, and it was never more evident than at the run-up to the action at Cape Trafalgar. His prayer written just before the battle reflected humility in the face of a higher power and a hope for something far-reaching for his world. He was thinking about more than the glory of victory.

*May the great God, whom I worship, grant to my Country and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious Victory; and may no misconduct in any one, tarnish it, and may Humanity, after Victory, be the predominant feature in the British Fleet. For myself, individually, I commit my life to Him who made me, and may His blessing light upon my endeavours for serving my country faithfully. To Him I resign myself, and the just cause which is entrusted to me to defend. Amen.*¹⁸

In addition, Nelson's last words, 'Thank God I have done my duty', were those of a naval officer who understood both his responsibilities and his limitations, and they were further evidence that Nelson had reached a significant level of wisdom in his final years.

A Way Forward

One of the most provocative observations about Nelson was described by Tom Pocock in the last page his biography Horatio Nelson. In those final paragraphs, Pocock described the end of a ceremony commemorating the 180th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. The remarks he cited were those of the then-rector of the Burnham Thorpe parsonage the Reverend Cecil Isaacson:

*He gave thanks for the happy occasion...and concluded 'And we thank Thee O Lord, for the life of Horatio Nelson and for his services to -.' He paused, as if unsure for which services it would still be appropriate to express gratitude: there had been two world wars since Trafalgar and the British empire was gone. Then he said, '- to humanity'. At first this sounded odd in the recollection of his thundering broadsides and the scandal of Emma. But, on reflection, the allusion seemed more apt. It is the humanity of Horatio Nelson that has been remembered.*¹⁹

And it is humanity, which was referred to haltingly by Reverend Isaacson and clearly by Nelson in his last prayer before Trafalgar, that opens a singular avenue for a deeper understanding of the elusive Nelson, the human being beyond the icon.



*Nelson, engraved by Bowyer for T.O. Churchill's Life of Lord Viscount Nelson, published in 1811.
Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.*

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- ¹ A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, & Company, 1897), pp. 397-98.
- ² Tom Pocock, *Nelson and His World* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), p. 126.
- ³ Colin White, *Nelson the Admiral* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2005), p. 1.
- ⁴ Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 198.
- ⁵ Joseph Callo, *Nelson Speaks: Admiral Lord Nelson in his Own Words* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. x.
- ⁶ Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson* (London: Henry Colburn, 1844), vi, p. 187.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, vii, pp. 90-91.
- ⁸ E.B. Potter and Chester W. Nimitz, editors, *Sea Power: A Naval History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 163.
- ⁹ Geoffrey Rawson, *Nelson's Letters from the Leeward Islands* (London: The Golden Cockerel Press, 1953), p. 19.
- ¹⁰ *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, vi, p. 116.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, iv, p. 95.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, i p. 4.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vi, p. 353.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, i, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 78.
- ¹⁷ *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, ii, pp. 434-35.
- ¹⁸ James Stanier Clarke and John M'Arthur, *The Life of Admiral Lord Nelson, K.B.* (London: T. Cadell and Davies, 1809), p. 442.
- ¹⁹ Tom Pocock, *Horatio Nelson* (London: The Bodley Head, 1987), p. 343.