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Young Nelson in the Boreas

By Rear Admiral Joseph F. Callo, U.S. Navy Reserve (Retired)

Assigned to the Caribbean and imbued with a fierce sense of duty, the future sea hero boldly defied the law-ignoring admiral, governor, and people of the West Indies.

Captain Horatio Nelson wasn't happy when he was appointed to command of the 28-gun frigate HMS *Boreas*. Up to that point in March 1784, he had every reason to believe that his career was in ascendancy. However, this new assignment did not appear to be career-enhancing.

By 1779 the officer destined for greatness had reached the rank of post captain, which guaranteed that he would rise with a degree of regularity, as those senior to him in the Royal Navy retired or died. Then in 1780, while captain of another 28-gun frigate, HMS *Hinchinbrooke*, Nelson distinguished himself in combat as the leader of the naval portion of a combined army-navy inshore attack on the Spanish at Nicaragua in Fort San Juan. And in 1782–83, following command of the *Hinchinbrooke*, he captained yet another 28-gun frigate, HMS *Albemarle*, and was actively involved in convoy duty in the Baltic and Atlantic. While commanding the *Albemarle*, Nelson also led an amphibious assault against the French on Turks Island in the West Indies, and although unsuccessful, apparently no stigma was attached to him for the attack's failure. While commanding the *Albemarle*, he had come to the attention of Admiral Samuel Lord Hood and Prince William, the future King William IV; such visibility could make a big difference in the promising officer's assignments and even the continuity of his naval employment.

As his tour in the *Albemarle* drew to a close, Nelson hoped to be assigned to the Jamaica station, perhaps as commanding officer of a ship-of-the-line. That was a theater where he had a better chance to find career-enhancing action. As a possible alternative, he wrote to an acquaintance, Commodore William Cornwallis, in hope of serving under him in the East Indies, another theater where there was potential for career acceleration. As it turned out, however, Nelson was appointed to command of HMS *Boreas* and deployed to the West Indies, a station where there was little prospect for the kind of action that would work to the advantage of an aggressive 25-year-old frigate captain. To make matters worse from a career standpoint, there was no out-and-out-war in progress.

A Different Kind of Challenge

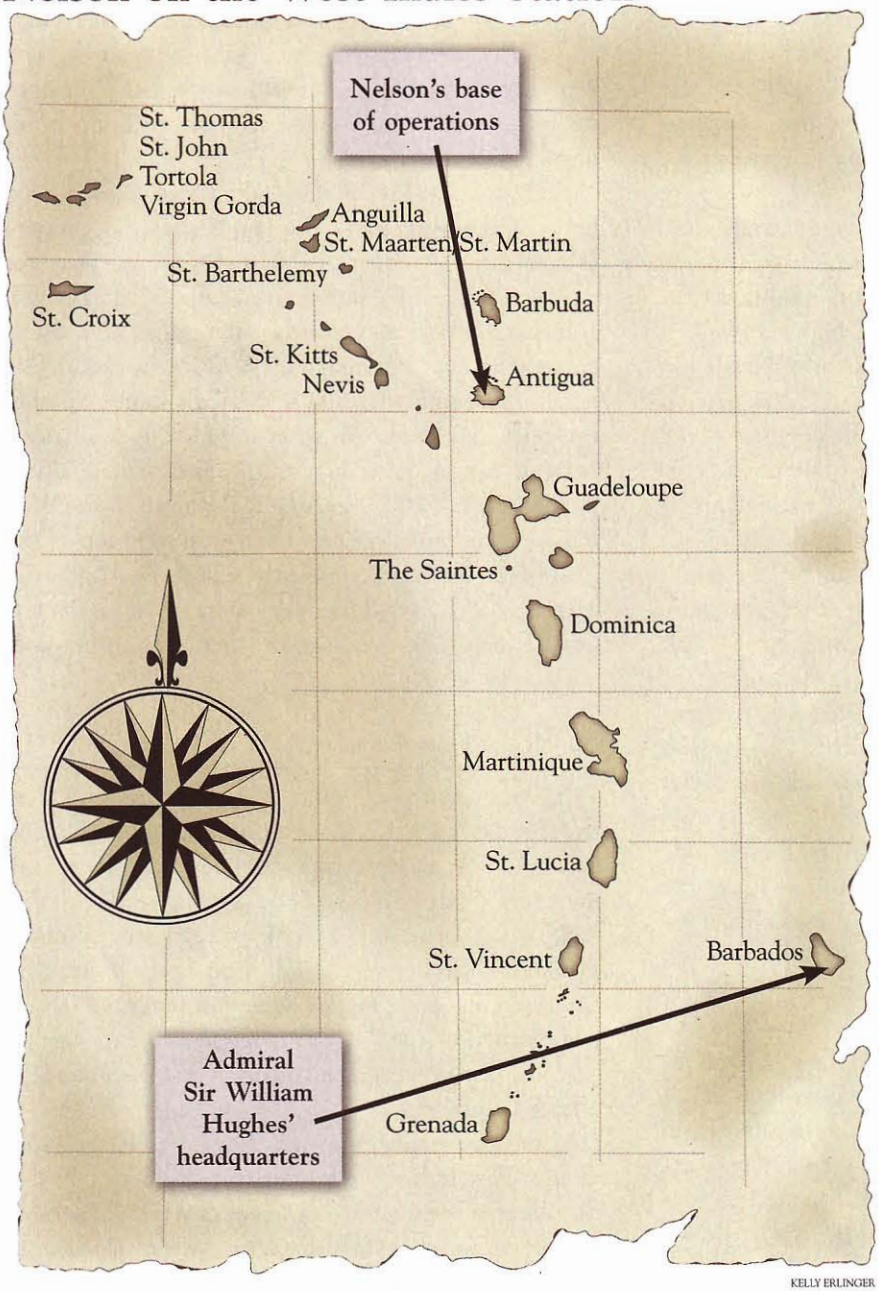
It's not surprising, then, that after his orders to the *Boreas* and the West Indies arrived, Nelson began a letter to his former commanding officer and mentor Captain William Locker with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm: "On last Friday I was commissioned for the *Boreas* . . . and I am sorry to say that the same day gave me an ague and fever."[1] He also complained of the "inconvenience and expense" of carrying the wife and daughter of his commanding officer on the transit.

In the perspective of events, however, Nelson's tour in the West Indies turned out to be a pivot point in his career, a three-year assignment that simultaneously would test and shape his character as a naval officer in career-threatening ways. It was a period when he had to deal with a major conflict between military and diplomatic interests. More important, it was a time when he blatantly challenged the judgments and orders of his commanding officer in the West Indies, Admiral Sir William Hughes.

IVAN BERRYMAN (WWW.IVANBERRYMAN.COM); NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH

Opposite: HMS Boreas, *depicted capturing the French ship* Compas *(right) on 29 August 1779, already was a seasoned veteran of the West Indies when Captain Horatio Nelson reluctantly assumed command of her in 1784. Left: John Francis Rigaud's painting of Nelson was completed in 1781, three years before the young officer began his Caribbean tour of duty. It is the earliest authenticated portrait of Nelson.*

Nelson on the West Indies Station



KELLY ERLINGER

In fact, Nelson's tour as captain of the *Boreas* came very close to ending his naval career. It was almost certainly more threatening in that respect than any of his later, more attention-getting assignments. In his biography *The Life of Nelson*, then-Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote of the dangers of Nelson's defiance of his immediate superior while serving on the West Indies station: "It is difficult for the non-military mind to realize how great is the moral effort of disobeying a superior, whose order . . . entails the most serious personal and professional injury, if violated without due cause; the burden of proving which rests upon the junior."[2]

Given the stressful circumstances of Nelson's three years in the *Boreas*, it's not surprising that he wrote at length describing the events of that period and how those events were affecting him. He was a prolific writer during his entire career, and the period between 1784 and 1787 was typical in that regard. Nelson himself signaled the importance of his writings at the end of a letter to his uncle Maurice Suckling, written from the *Boreas* while at Nevis in July 1786: "[B]ut what I have said [in the foregoing letter] is the inward monitor of my heart upon every difficult occasion."[3] In the long view of history, what Nelson wrote about the events of his West Indies tour became a unique means of seeing those events from an "inside" perspective, rather than from an external view.

The Storm Clouds Gather

By the time he had been on the West Indies station six months, Nelson was writing of his difficulties. For example, in January 1785 he wrote again to Captain Locker, this time complaining about Admiral Hughes and the local controversy over the enforcement of Britain's Navigation Acts:

> The longer I am on this Station the worse I like it. Our Commander has not that opinion of his own sense that he ought to have. He is led by the advice of the Islanders to admit the Yankees to a Trade; at least to wink at it. . . . I for one, am determined not to suffer the Yankees to come where my ship is . . . They will first become the Carriers, and next have possession of our Islands, are we ever again embroiled in a French war. The residents of these Islands are Americans by connexion and by interest, and are inimical to Great Britain.[4]

The problem to which Nelson referred involved the Navigation Acts' ban on direct maritime trade between the young United States and Britain's West Indies colonies. In the strategic scheme of things, the strict enforcement of the Navigation Acts in the West Indies might have made sense in London, but for the British colonists in the West Indies it did not. The colonists' economic well-being relied heavily on the trade carried in American ships, which included such basics as lumber, flour, and tobacco coming from America, with exports such as molasses, rum, and coffee making the return trip.

The result was that the Navigation Acts were largely circumvented by the British plantation owners and local merchants, for whom the two-way trade was a matter of survival, and as well by the American merchants who were eager to restore what had been a profitable traffic before the American Revolution. The law was also ignored by the British government's administrators and customs agents in the islands. That latter group was not only sympathetic to the colonists' predicament, many of them were benefiting financially from the corruption involved.

The ranks of those willing to look the other way while direct trade with America continued included Admiral Hughes, who was based ashore at Barbados in the southern half of the West Indies. Nelson, the senior officer afloat on the station, commanded his small squadron from a base at English Harbor, Antigua. And for the most part, he and his crews operated in the northern half of the station.

The significant geographic separation between Nelson's base and that of Hughes was symbolic of their differing opinions about enforcement of the Navigation Acts. Nelson insisted it was not a preference but a duty as a Royal Navy captain and the senior officer afloat in the theater to strictly enforce those laws. And he did so. In one respect, Nelson simply was following the example of the officer he was relieving and with whom he had formed a lifelong friendship, Captain Cuthbert Collingwood. But it quickly became clear that Nelson had very strong feelings of his own about the importance of aggressively enforcing the Navigation Acts.

Admiral Hughes insisted that primary authority on the issue rested with him and the British governor in the theater, Major General Thomas Shirley. Like Hughes, Shirley was more interested in getting along with the local population than enforcing the Navigation Acts. The result was an astonishing running dispute between Nelson on one side and Hughes and Shirley on the other. Other players in the disagreement included British customs officials, the colonists who were bearing the economic brunt of Nelson's determination, and the captains of the American ships involved. Clearly Nelson, who was a junior captain, was sailing among enormously dangerous political rocks and shoals.

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An unknown artist portrayed Frances Nisbet while she lived on the island of Nevis and acted as hostess of the Montpelier plantation.

The Young Widow

By Joseph F. Callo

When she met Nelson in 1785, Frances Nisbet was a 22-year-old widow. On the death of her husband after only 18 months of marriage, she had taken over the management of her uncle's household at Montpelier, the finest plantation house on the island of Nevis. Her uncle, John Herbert, was among the few plantation owners in the West Indies who welcomed Nelson into their homes.

Fanny was pretty, and the exotic setting of Montpelier, set on a breezy Nevis hillside overlooking the Caribbean, was a perfect setting for her. Not surprisingly, Nelson fell in love with Fanny, and Montpelier became an important refuge for him. Even Fanny's lively five-year old son, Josiah, added to the attractiveness of the situation for the young captain of HMS *Boreas*.

Nelson was an ardent suitor, and he wrote to his uncle, Maurice Suckling, in November 1785: "[H]er mental accomplishments are superior to most people's of either sex, and we shall come together as two people most sincerely attached to each other from friendship." This idealistic tone was sustained by Nelson throughout the courtship, and the couple were married in March 1787. Prince William, who was in the West Indies as captain of HMS *Pegasus*, gave the bride away. Although Montpelier is long gone, the remnants of the stone pillars marking the entrance to the plantation continue to stand guard, and the tree under which marriage occurred is still standing.

On the surface, the marriage appeared to be an ideal union. Nelson was an incurable romantic, having fallen in love with two young women shortly before his assignment to the command of the *Boreas*. One was the daughter of the provost marshal of the British garrison at Quebec City, the other the daughter of an English clergyman in France. Fanny seemed, however, to be the ideal person to provide the emotional support Nelson craved. For her part, as a widow with a son, Fanny needed security, and a rising young naval officer, even one who had not yet established a significant financial base, seemed a very good match.

Unfortunately, by the time Nelson had survived the five years without naval employment that followed his tour in the West Indies, during which time he and Fanny lived in Burnham Thorp just off the Norfolk coast, it was clear that the marriage was in trouble. And when Nelson later met and fell in love with Lady Emma Hamilton, it was over.

Both the admiral and the governor were amiable administrators, and neither wanted trouble. Nelson, on the other hand, was determined to do his duty as he saw it. British historian Michael Lewis wrote of Nelson at this point in his career: "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 was one-hundred-per-cent right."[5]

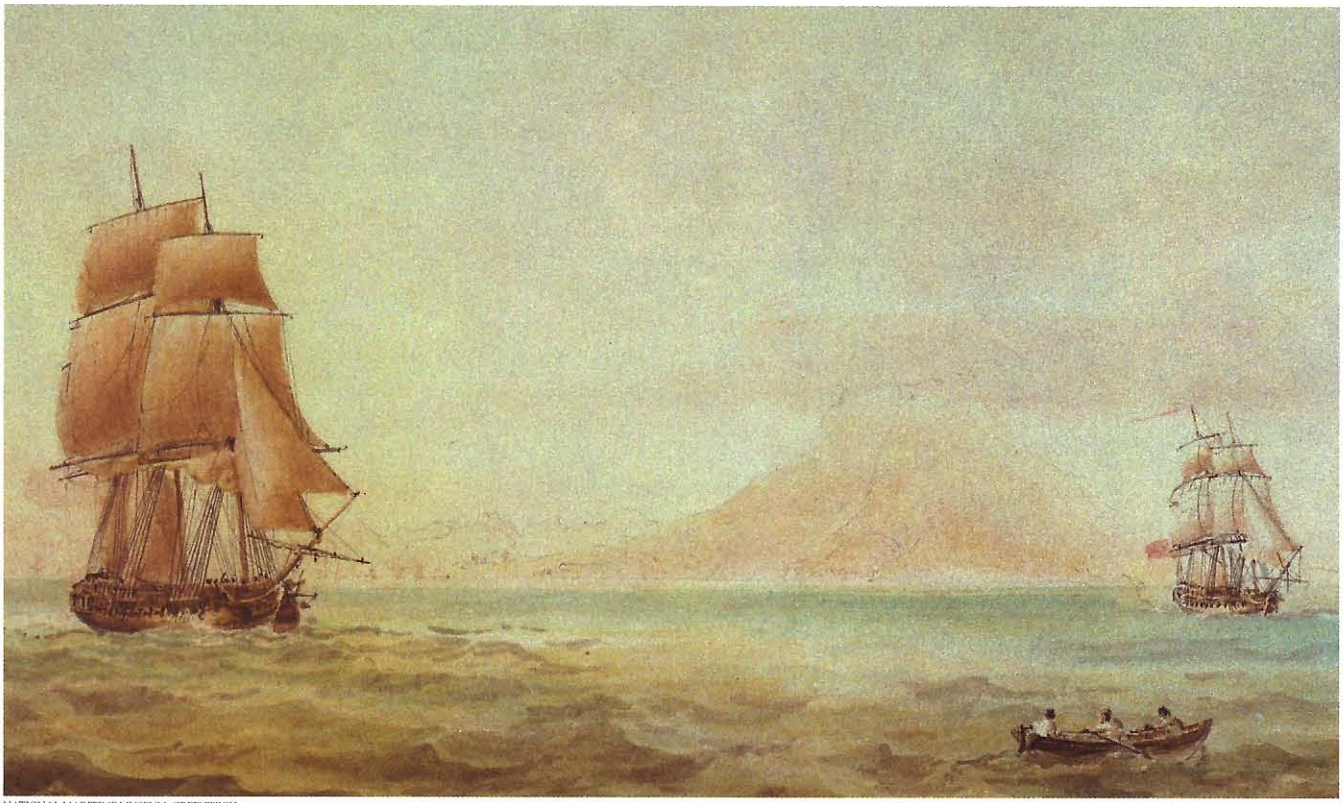
The Battle Intensifies

In December 1784 the problems over the Navigation Acts reached a crisis, primarily because of the actions of Captain Collingwood, who had intercepted an American merchantman and prevented her master from discharging his cargo in St. John's, Antigua. The American captain went ashore and complained about being detained, and a furor ensued that involved Collingwood, Nelson, Hughes, Shirley, and eventually the local populace. At one point Admiral Hughes sought legal advice from the King's Counsel in the West Indies, and the letter subsequently written by the counsel apparently supported the case against Collingwood's action and Nelson's position: "Any military interference without requisition from the officers of the Customs in any port of the British Dominions is certainly very unusual and singular."[6] As a result of the legal opinion, Admiral Hughes wrote an order on 30 December that limited the role of the Royal Navy in the theater to sending ships suspected of violating the Navigation Acts into port, where the case would be decided by the "Governor or his representative." Under the order, Nelson and his ships would be no more than monitors of what was going on.

For his part, Nelson pointed out that his orders from the Admiralty included enforcing British maritime law on the station, and on 9 January he fired back at Admiral Hughes with a long and aggressive letter that skirted the edge of insubordination:

> [A]t a time when Great Britain is using every endeavour to suppress illicit Trade at Home, it is not wished that the ships of this Station should be singular, by being the only spectators of the illegal Trade which I know is carried on in these Islands. The Governors may be imposed upon by false declarations; we, who are on the spot, cannot. . . . 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.[7]

Nelson did indeed know Britain's Navigation Acts, and there can be no doubt that he knew them better than Admiral Hughes. That notwithstanding, Nelson's letter went beyond a dispute over a specific set of laws. It raised serious questions about a captain defying an order from his report-



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HMS Boreas *(left) is under way in the West Indies in this work by celebrated Age of Sail painter Nicholas Pocock.*

ing senior. It also challenged the influence of the British governor with the captain of a Royal Navy ship operating in his station. On the face of it, Nelson was saying that he would be the final judge on the question of enforcing the Navigation Acts. He would perform his duty as he defined it. In his own terms: "I must either disobey my orders, or disobey Acts of Parliament . . . I determined upon the former, trusting on the uprightness of my intention, and believed that my country would not allow me to be ruined by protecting her commerce."[8] He was defying the orders of his reporting senior and was entangled in a dispute that also involved military-diplomatic precedence. It was a type of disagreement that has not been limited to the Age of Sail.

Nelson's correspondence at the time underscored several important factors related to his motivation in the situation. For example, he demonstrated a notable lack of respect for Admiral Hughes when he wrote to Captain Locker in November 1784: "This Station is far from a pleasant one. The Admiral and all about him are great ninnies."[9] In addition he showed a strong emotional dislike for the British West Indian colonists involved in the trade he was trying to prevent, when he wrote a subsequent letter to Locker on 15 January 1785: "The residents of these Islands are American by connexion. . . . They are as great rebels as ever were in America had they the power to show it."[10] He even had something to say about the American shipmasters and their owners in the same letter: "[A]n American arrives; sprung a leak, a mast, and what not . . . sells his cargo for ready money: goes to Martinico, buys molasses, and so round and round. But I hate them all."[11]

Nelson later underscored his resentment of the American traders in "A Sketch of my Life," which he wrote more than a decade after his duty in the *Boreas*: "The Americans, when colonists, possessed almost all of the trade from America to our West India Islands: and in the return of peace, they forgot, on this occasion, that they became Foreigners, and of course had no right to trade in the British Colonies."[12]

As the controversy raged, Nelson was driven by a fighting doctrine that mirrored the one he employed in combat: seize the initiative and press the enemy aggressively. He stood his legal ground and appealed to the Admiralty and even King George III. Both Admiral Hughes and Governor Shirley fought back, but they were no match for Nelson. In contrast, however, the colonists and the American captains fought very effectively by suing Nelson directly for their financial losses resulting from his actions. Whatever the outcome with the Admiralty and government was going to be, if Nelson had lost the court action initiated against him by the local merchants and plantation owners—which involved £40,000, approximately $5.6 million today—he would have been ruined financially. The colonists also attempted to have Nelson arrested, and as a result, he was for months a virtual prisoner in the *Boreas*.

Victory

In the long run, the local court rejected the claims against Nelson, and the Admiralty upheld his right to move aggressively against those violating the Navigation Acts in the West Indies, but it was a drawn-out process that tested Nelson physically and

A Frigate Mentality

By Joseph F. Callo

HMS *Boreas*, Nelson's ship in the West Indies, was a Modified *Mermaid*–class frigate built in 1774. The 18th century was a time when crises and naval buildups were frequent, and Britain needed great numbers of ships to prosecute her global blue-water strategy. Frigates, designed for fast construction in commercial yards, provided the ship numbers that gave truth to the 18th-century claim that Britain's influence reached the six-fathom curve of every shore on the globe.

When compared with her 32-gun and 36-gun sisters (fifth-rate ships), the *Boreas* was, at 28 guns, relatively small for her time. She was classified as a sixth-rate ship, the smallest rating in the Royal Navy. But the *Boreas* was, nevertheless, a full-fledged member of the fleet of hard-working vessels that were the naval utility ships of their time.

A full spectrum of tasks constituted the 18th-century frigates' chores: convoy escort, intelligence gathering, blockade, amphibious assaults, cutting-out actions, message carrying, relaying a commander-in-chief's messages ship-to-ship over distances and vice versa, transport of diplomats and senior military officers, littoral actions, enforcement of Britain's maritime laws, and support of ships-of-the-line prior to and following major fleet actions.

Frigate captains were used to operating independently, and Nelson was no exception. He had commanded three frigates before the *Boreas*: HMS *Hinchinbrooke*, *Janus*, and *Albemarle*. During those tours he had no doubt developed the action-seeking attitude that went with frigate assignments. Nelson recognized that frigate mentality in himself when he wrote in 1793 to his brother the Reverend William Nelson, "I cannot bear the thought of being absent from the scene of action." In 1799 he touched on the characteristic again when he described how, as a lieutenant in HMS *Lowestoffe*, he was able to board a prize in a fierce gale, after the ship's first lieutenant failed in the attempt: "I know it is my disposition, that difficulties and dangers do but increase my desire of attempting them."

The other mental conditioning that frigate command imparted to its captains was a tendency toward independent thinking and a willingness to take action on one's own initiative. By the time he was assigned to the *Boreas*, Nelson was used to making decisions on the basis of the circumstances at hand, rather than orders shaped at a distant time and place.

mentally. Nelson's tactics in his fight with his immediate military senior and the governor were a political version of the "pell-mell" combat tactics he would use 20 years later at Trafalgar, where he wrote to his captains: "[N]o captain can do very wrong if he places his Ship alongside that of an Enemy."[13] It turned out that those aggressive political tactics were a perfect match with his offense-dominated doctrine that drove his overall approach to the dispute with his admiral, the local governor, and the local merchants and plantation owners.

Arguably the most important long-term result of Nelson's vindication in his dispute over enforcement of the Navigation Acts was that it reinforced his inclination to define his duty in his own terms. That willingness to trust his own judgment of on-scene circumstances would emerge repeatedly, getting him into what he referred as "scrapes" with the Admiralty and the British government. On the negative side and in addition to the threats to his career, Nelson's subsequent tendency to act on his own, rather than the orders of those distant at the time, generated a significant amount of resentment among some fellow officers.

Although Nelson triumphed legally in his dispute with Admiral Hughes and Governor Shirley, his victory was not without a price. When he arrived back in England on 4 July 1787, Nelson anticipated that the crew of the *Boreas* would be paid off and that he would move on to another command. He believed he had done an important job under difficult circumstances, and there was talk of renewed war with France. On Nelson's part, there was also renewed hope for a ship-of-the-line. But unexpectedly he was ordered to reprovision his ship for another deployment. Ultimately the threat of renewed war receded, however, and the *Boreas*' crew was paid off. At that point Nelson was thoroughly disillusioned by his reception at the Admiralty, and he spoke to friends of his intention to resign from "an ungrateful Service." But it appears that the First Lord of the Admiralty at the time, Admiral Richard Lord Howe, was able to convince him that he still had a career in the Royal Navy.

As Nelson pressed his efforts to get a new command, it became increasingly clear just how bad his standing was at the Admiralty. On the facts, however, it was not surprising that he was in disfavor there. In addition to the drawn-out Navigation Acts wrangle, there were other contentious matters that weakened Nelson's standing with his seniors. They included a dispute over authority with the resident dockyard commissioner of Antigua and Nelson's handling of a difficult situation involving Prince William, who was commanding officer of a ship under Nelson's command in the West Indies, and the prince's first lieutenant. There also was Nelson's commutation of a death sentence for a seaman who had been convicted of desertion.

Nelson's decision in that case was perceived by the Admiralty to be an overstepping of his authority. And there also was an accusation by Nelson of fraud in the management of the British dockyards in the West Indies.

It took more than five years ashore on half pay before Nelson finally was able to overcome the conspicuous neglect of the Admiralty and secure his next command. It was a desperately discouraging time for him, and at one point he even considered joining the navy of Catherine the Great, as did many of the unemployed Royal Navy officers on half pay. In a thought-provoking "what if," Nelson could have been an officer in the tsarina's navy at the same time as America's John Paul Jones, who was an admiral in the Russian navy from May to October 1788.

Back on Course

At last, in January 1793 Nelson was appointed to command HMS *Agamemon*, a well-found 64-gun ship-of-the-line. He wrote of the news to his wife in January 1793: "*Post nubila Phoebus;* —After clouds comes sunshine. The Admiralty so smile upon me, that really I am as much surprised as when they frowned."[14] Nelson was chastened but not defeated by his five years "on the beach," and then suddenly he was back at sea, this time in command of a small but agile ship-of-the-line, a ship that many think became his favorite. Colin White, a preeminent Nelson expert, described Nelson's enthusiasm and how he was employing it: "He obviously reveled in his new ship. . . . Almost at once, he demonstrated her capabilities by chasing a squadron of French frigates among dangerous shoals off Cape Barfleur."[15] Nelson was back on his career track, matured and tempered in ways that helped him to achieve history-shaping victories for the British at the Battles of the Nile in 1798, Copenhagen in 1801, and finally Trafalgar in 1805, where he became, in the words of Mahan, "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."[16] ⚓

1. Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, ed., *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, vol. I (London: Henry Colburn, 1844), p. 100.
2. A. T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, second edition (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001; orig. pub. Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), p. 45.
3. Nicolas, *Dispatches*, p. 187.
4. Ibid., p. 113.
5. Geoffrey Rawson, ed., *Nelson's Letters from the Leeward Islands and other Original Documents in the Public Record Office and the British Museum* (London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1953), p. 19.
6. Ibid., p. 27
7. Ibid., pp. 29, 30.
8. Nicolas, *Dispatches*, pp. 157, 158.
9. Ibid., p. 112.
10. Ibid., p. 114.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 11.
13. Ibid., p. 91.
14. Ibid., p. 297.
15. Colin White, *Nelson: The New Letters* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press in association with the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Naval Museum, 2005), p. 154 .
16. Mahan, *Nelson*, p. xv.