214 Years Ago

The Battle of Trafalgar, fought 21 October 1805, was one of the most important and decisive Naval engagements of all time, decisively establishing the supremacy of the Royal Navy on the high seas. Rather than a conventional engagement between lines of battle with gunnery duels, the English made a bold attack that allowed them to gain local superiority over the enemy and raked their ships with devastating broadsides. The Franco-Spanish fleet was decisively defeated and British supremacy on the high seas was decisively established for the rest of the 19th century. Lord Nelson's defeat of the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar allowed British trade to flourish around the world, laying the foundations for Britain's emergence as an...
economic superpower. It also made possible the Greatest Century of Missions, as Protestant missionaries were able to sail to every corner of the world. The Royal Navy's domination of the high seas brought an end to the slave trade in the 19th Century.

Britain vs. France

The war between Great Britain and France was a clash between a great naval power verses a great land power. In the same year that Emperor Napoleon of France won his greatest land victory at Austerlitz, his plan to invade the British Isles was destroyed by the victory of Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, off the coast of Spain.
A Naval Power

After the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, England emerged as the greatest of the world's maritime powers. This permitted vast mercantile interests in every corner of the world. As an island nation, since the time of King Alfred the Great, England relied on her Navy for protection, but had relatively small land forces, especially compared to France. While Britain's standing army was quite small, a large Navy was always maintained and the Royal Navy honed its ship-handling and gunnery skills, maintaining a high standard of seamanship by constant experience.

The Ravages of Revolution

At the outbreak of war with revolutionary France, the Royal Navy was operating at a high level of efficiency. However the French fleet had been drastically weakened by a purge of its officers during the French Revolution. Many of France's experienced seamen and gunners had been dismissed from the service and sent to the guillotine. With the Royal Navy blockading French ports, the French Navy deteriorated even further with inexperienced crews who spent most of their time holed up in port.
Invasion Imminent

However, to defeat Britain, a land invasion was necessary. Before the French could consider invading the British Isles, the Royal Navy would need to be drastically reduced. Emperor Napoleon ordered his Admiral Pierre Villeneuve (1763-1806) to command the French fleet and to unite the squadrons at Toulon in the Mediterranean and Brest on the Atlantic, with the Spanish fleet in the West Indies and Cadiz. With this concentration of forces, Napoleon hoped to overwhelm the Royal Navy and open the way for a land invasion across the channel. Villeneuve commanded an impressive fleet in terms of gun-power and the number of first-rate ships. The French and Spanish combined fleet had more line-of-battle ships than the British fleet and some of the most powerful warships in the world were under French command.
In the summer of 1805, Emperor Napoleon was encamped with his Grande Armée at Boulogne, ready to invade Britain. Napoleon required the French Navy and its Spanish allies, to destroy the Royal Navy in order to enable his invasion force to cross the Channel. The French Mediterranean Fleet under Vice Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve was to join up with the Spanish Fleet under Admiral Federico Gravina and enable the French Atlantic squadron to break out of the British blockade at Brest.

Breaching the Blockade
When Villeneuve took refuge at Cadiz, Napoleon ordered him relieved of command. Hoping to redeem his honour, Villeneuve decided to sail before his replacement arrived. On 19 October, 33 French and Spanish ships of the line began to leave Cadiz. They sailed for Gibraltar with Admiral Nelson’s blockade force in pursuit. William Cornwallis had maintained a tight blockade off Brest, with the Channel Fleet. However, Lord Nelson adopted a loose blockade in the hope of luring the French out for a major battle. Nelson used frigates (faster, but not robust enough for line-of-battle) to keep constant watch on the harbour, while the main force remained out of sight, 50 miles West of the shore.

Quantity vs. Quality
While the French and Spanish Fleet outnumbered the Royal Navy, the French crews included few experienced sailors. At the Battle of Trafalgar, Nelson was outnumbered and outgunned with the enemy totalling nearly 30,000 men and 2,568 guns to his 17,000 men and 2,148 guns. Although the Fleet under the command of Lord Nelson were outnumbered and outgunned, there is no doubt that the British sailors were far better trained and more disciplined.
Horatio Nelson – Britain's Most Famous Seaman

Lord Nelson's father was a minister of the Gospel. Horatio Nelson enlisted in the Royal Navy at age 12. He served aboard the *Carcass* at the age of 15, on an expedition to the Arctic Sea. At age 18, he became a Lieutenant and at age 20 was given command of the Frigate *Hinchinbrook*. Nelson became the youngest captain in the Royal Navy in 1779, aged 20. Nelson saw service in the Caribbean during the American Revolutionary War. Nelson rose in the ranks swiftly. He married Fanny Nesbit, a doctor's widow, 11 March 1787, at the end of his tour of duty in the Caribbean. In 1794, Nelson was shot in the face during an engagement at Calvi on Corsica and lost the sight of his right eye. His remaining eye was also damaged and he was slowly going blind in the years leading up to his death. He first won renown for his initiative at the Battle of Cape St Vincent in 1797 against the French Revolutionary forces. Nelson became a Rear Admiral in 1797. Following intense fighting on the Canary Islands, the battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, he lost his right arm. His stunning victory at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 against Napoleon's expeditionary force made Nelson a national hero.

**Nelson's Bridge**

During the Battle of the Nile in 1798, Nelson's *HMS Captain* became so mauled as to be incapable of further service. Therefore, Nelson plowed the ship into the Starboard quarter of the *San Nicolas* and led a boarding party onto that ship. The *San Jose* had entangled itself with the *San Nicolas*, which was on fire. With the battle cry of "Westminster Abbey, or glorious victory!" Nelson led his men across the burning *San Nicolas* to seize the *San Jose*. As Nelson's men secured both ships, this move was afterwards called "Nelson's patent bridge for boarding first rates".

Successive Naval victories caused Nelson to be promoted to Vice Admiral, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet in 1803.

**HMS Victory**

His flagship, the *HMS Victory*, was constructed from more than 6,000 trees, mostly oak. *Victory* cost £63,175 to build (equivalent to £60 Million today). *Victory* was operated by a crew of 850 men and mounted 104 smooth bore muzzle-loading cannon. A total of 26 miles of rope (cordage) was used to rig *Victory* along with 768 blocks, or pulleys. *Victory* had 7 anchors, the heaviest weighing more than 4.5 tonnes.
Operating the 32-pounders aboard **HMS Victory** required a high degree of efficient teamwork to maintain a fast rate of fire. Each gunner had a specific task, which had to be carried out in order. Swabbing out the barrel before the charge was inserted prevented an accidental explosion while loading, after which the charge and ball were loaded. The heavy gun then had to be run back into firing position, at which point the gun was aimed and the fuse ignited.

**Opposing Fleets**

On 21 October, Admiral Nelson had 27 ships of the line under his command. The French and Spanish had 33 ships of the line, including some of the largest in the world at that time. The prevailing tactical thinking of the time required a fleet to manoeuvre in a single line of battle to engage the enemy with maximum firepower through broadsides in parallel lines. This line of battle system facilitated control of the fleet through flag signals.

**Innovative Tactics**

However, Lord Nelson innovated a risky and aggressive manoeuvre of sailing directly for the enemy line, attacking head-on to break the Franco-Spanish Fleet line of battle and then rake broadside fire at their bows, to which they would be unable to respond. To lessen the time his fleet would be exposed to this danger, Nelson had his ships make all available sail. In preparation for the battle, Nelson ordered the ships of his fleet to be painted in distinctively yellow and black patterns (the **Nelson chequer**) to distinguish them from their opponents and avoid friendly fire.

**Calculated Risk**

Nelson was aware that the French and Spanish gunners were ill trained and supplemented with land soldiers, who would have found it difficult to fire accurately from a moving platform on the rolling seas. The ships were rolling heavily across the swells. Lord Nelson's plan was a serious risk, but a carefully calculated one.
Admiral Lord Nelson had prepared his men for the risky and aggressive manoeuvre of charging for the enemy line in two columns with the intention of punching through their line of battle and achieving local superiority by doubling up on enemy ships. Victory would go to the side that could reload and shoot the fastest and most accurately and Nelson believed that it was the British sailors that could achieve this. He instructed his captains to be free from hampering rules and to take initiative during the inevitable confusion caused by the Pell-Mell battle. He encouraged initiative by every ship's captain:

"No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy."

Circumstances would dictate the execution of their plans. The guiding rule was that the enemy's rear was to be cut off and superior force concentrated on the enemy's line of escape. Early in the morning of 21 October, Nelson's fleet found the combined French-Spanish fleet in a long line headed for the straits of Gibraltar. At 08:40, the French-Spanish reversed course to offer battle.

Duty Demanded

As French Admiral Villeneuve ordered his fleet to wear together and confront the Royal Navy, Nelson hoisted a series of signals:

"England expects that every man will do his duty."

The crews on the Royal Navy ships had to endure enemy broadsides for 40 minutes during their attack.

Devastating the Enemy

Yet they succeeded in cutting the line and raking the French and Spanish vessels with devastating broadsides. The centre and rear of the French-Spanish line were subjected to savage close engagements, where the British used their superior gunnery to batter the French and Spanish ships, causing massive casualties and silencing their guns. Just before 12:00 noon, the two fleets came within range and

**HMS Victory** leading the first column became involved in desperate fight with four enemy ships. Admiral Collingwood (flagship **HMS Royal Sovereign**), commanding the Downwind (Lee) column engaged the Spanish contingent of the combined fleet. At 11:50am, **HMS Victory** hoisted the signal:

"Engage the enemy more closely" as the first shot of the battle was fired.
By noon, Victory was engaged with no less than four enemy vessels, including the most powerful warship in the world, the Spanish 136-gun first rate Santissiima Trinidad, along with Hero, Redoutable and the French flagship, Bucentaure. Despite serious damage, Victory passed under the stern of Bucentaure and fired a devastating broadside down the length of the French flagship. Redoutable carried a large force of marines. One of the French sharpshooters hit Nelson, the bullet lodging in his spine. As Captain Jean-Jacques Lucas was preparing his crew to board the Victory, they were disrupted by the second British ship in the line, the 98-gun Temeraire, firing into the crew assembled on Redoutable’s deck. Under fire from both Victory and Temeraire, Redoutable fought on until her crew had sustained 90% casualties, most of them fatal.

Men on both sides fought with tremendous courage amidst indescribable carnage. As Victory crossed the line, it became entangled with the Redoutable. French infantry poured fire onto the decks of Victory and at 1:15pm, a musket ball struck Admiral Nelson who was standing in full view on the quarterdeck overseeing the battle. Victory was saved from being taken by the arrival of the 98-gun Temeraire, which hit Redoutable with a broadside that killed and wounded 200 Frenchman. Temeraire then plowed into Redoutable and disabled Fougueux with a broadside from its disengaged side.

Triumphant Victory
At 13:55, Redoutable finally struck her colours to indicate surrender and this permitted Victory and Temeraire to double up on Bucentaure. By the end of the battle at 16:15, as Bucentaure surrendered to HMS Conqueror, the French and Spanish combined fleets had lost 22 ships and the British none, although many Royal Navy vessels were severely damaged. Before Lord Nelson died, three hours later, he had been informed that his final battle had been a triumphant success. More than half the enemy fleet was captured, or destroyed. Not one British ship had been lost. Lord Nelson’s final words were: “Now I am satisfied. Thank God I have done my duty.”

As the sea battle took place about 20 miles to the North-West of Cape Trafalgar, the battle was named Trafalgar. Nelson’s last recorded words were “God and my country.”

Aftermath
French and Spanish casualties exceeded 13,000 in the battle. France lost 10 ships, destroyed, or captured, 2,218 dead, 1,155 wounded and 4,000 captured. Spain lost 10 ships captured, 1,025 dead, 1,383 wounded, 4,000 captured. The French and Spanish casualties were 10 times higher than those of the British. Although the first British ships to engage took severe punishment, not a single Royal Navy vessel was lost. Nelson’s overwhelming triumph over the combined Franco-Spanish Fleet ensured Britain’s protection from invasion for the remainder of the Napoleonic Wars. Vice Admiral Villeneuve was taken prisoner aboard his flagship and brought to Britain. Villeneuve attended Nelson’s funeral while in Britain. He was paroled in 1806 and allowed to return to France, where he was murdered enroute to Paris with 6 stab wounds. The official French report, was that he had committed suicide! Although Napoleon ordered an ambitious naval expansion programme, he was never again able to effectively challenge Britain at sea.
Following the Battle of Trafalgar, the Royal Navy was never again seriously challenged by the French fleet. Lord Nelson became and remains Britain's greatest Naval War Hero and an inspiration to the Royal Navy. London's famous Trafalgar Square was named in honour of Nelson's victory and the statue on Nelson's Column, finished in 1843, towers triumphantly over it. The daring, unconventional tactics employed by Nelson ensured a strategically decisive victory. It is a tribute to Nelson's delegating style of leadership that the battle continued to a successful conclusion, even after his critical injury. Lord Nelson was highly respected as a model of duty and devotion to one's country.

Inspiring Example

The news of his death at the battle produced an outpouring of grief. King George III declared: "We have lost more than we have gained. We do not know whether we should mourn, or rejoice. The country has gained the most splendid and decisive victory... but it has been dearly purchased."

His funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral in London was a vast state occasion. The funeral procession consisted of 32 admirals, 100 captains and an escort of 10,000 soldiers, which accompanied the coffin from the Admiralty to St. Paul's Cathedral, where the service lasted 4 hours. The warmth, courage and generosity of the spirit of Lord Nelson, won the affection and loyalty of his officers and men and the admiration of the Empire.
"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends."

John 15:13

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