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200th Anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar dinner
United Service Club
Friday, 21 October 2005, 7pm

The Hon P de Jersey AC,
Chief Justice

I am very honoured to have been invited to speak this evening. I say that especially acknowledging this is not only an annual event, but that tonight is special in our celebrating the bicentenary of the battle, or I should say the victory of Nelson over the French and Spanish marauders. You honour me greatly with the invitation.

Now I must at once dispel a possible misconception. The published invitation flatteringly described me as a "noted military historian". I must not sail under false colours. A helpful friend sought to support the description: "You are a military historian", he said: "You're on record with descriptions of your bivouac and camping experiences in the school cadets and the University Regiment." Well…I am also the proud owner of the seven volume official history of Australia's role in the second World War, though it is not, I confess, completely read. But in any event, I do this evening at once acknowledge your much superior appreciation, ladies and gentlemen, of the nuances of the Battle of Trafalgar.

And so I recall the scientist distinguished in an esoteric field who tired of repeatedly delivering the results of his complex research at international meetings. This evening, for a change, in a new city for the first time, he invited his devoted chauffeur: "You pretend to me, deliver the paper, and I'll listen from the audience." At the conclusion of the chauffeur's apparently learned presentation, he was challenged from the floor by a question of the most abstruse complexion. "A simple question," responded the chauffeur: "Indeed, I'll leave it to my chauffeur to answer it." Well so far as I pretend this evening to any command of the detail of the Battle, please assume – in relation to any queries – that I am the chauffeur and you are the expert.

We do, though, in our knowledge of this Battle, share one thing in common: none of us was there. We have to rely on the contemporary accounts of others. We would not have wanted to be there in that ferociously bloody battle, I suppose, except perhaps observing

from a helicopter had that technology been available. Ah, the smug complacency of the 21st century, at least pre-September 11 and Bali.

But then, of the Victory's crew of more than 600, as many as three-quarters were involuntary in that they were pressed seamen, dragooned for the most part from the merchant navy. Pressed they may have been, but they rose with valour undiminished to the legendary signal hoisted by Her Majesty's ship Victory at 11:48 hours on 21st October 1805: "England expects that every man will do his duty".

That signal by the way could actually have referred also to women and children. The women on the ships were stowaways, sometimes to escape detection dressing as boys. The children were boys, as young as 9 and 10: let us not overlook that Nelson himself went to sea in the year 1770 at the age of a mere 12. And his boyish presentation survived. As has been said, "the famous Admiral, with his slight figure, soft face, boyish and sensitive, looked more like a poet than a fighting seaman" (Villiers: The Battle of Trafalgar (1965) p 12).

Of course in a very real sense, Nelson's nemesis at Trafalgar was not Vice-Admiral Silvestre de Villeneuve, commanding the French fleet, but Napoleon Bonaparte himself, Napoleon – then the menace of Europe, menace of the world. It was Trafalgar that crippled Napoleon's expansionism, and I'll return to that. And ironically it was the slight Nelson, "the greatest Admiral in the world", who thwarted the diminutive Emperor – and anyone who has seen the length of Napoleon's bed in his chamber at Fontainbleau will appreciate what I say.

Trafalgar was a "battle", not a war; but a battle with world-defining consequence. Our Australian politicians have been assiduous in reminding us over recent years of a veritable welter of military anniversaries. I hope our weary veterans haven't tired of being shipped here and there, if not everywhere. It is good that we are able to recall this important anniversary independently of external prompts; to celebrate its demonstration of utterly splendid heroism.

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On the morning of Friday 16 September last in London, Kaye and I took the ferry from Westminster to Greenwich. The boat was, without warning, halted by the Harbour Master just short of our destination, not, I am pleased to confirm, because of our presence on board. No, to our delight, we had been stopped to give way to a flotilla from Greenwich destined for St Pauls. This was a re-enacting of the transmission of Nelson's body from the Painted Hall at Greenwich, where it had lain in state from 5 to 7 January 1806, to the cathedral for his funeral. From our exceptional viewing platform, I am afraid it seemed a rather scrappy flotilla: I suspect Nelson would not have been particularly proud of it: and why, if the real event occurred in January, was this happening in September? – the weather I suppose.

Oh for contemporary expediencies! There had earlier been the re-enactment of the October battle – earlier, and politically sanitized with the nationality of the sides transmuted into colours: there could be no overt challenge to French sensibilities: especially where London had just secured or was about to secure the Olympics! What would the heroic Nelson have thought of that? And looking down now upon Trafalgar Square, the stoney-faced Admiral's view includes "Alison Lapper Pregnant", the wonderfully correct addition of the naked sculpted body on the 4th plinth: maybe in fact a sympathetic view from Nelson, himself denied an arm and an eye.

Later that day in Greenwich, we ascended the knoll up to the Royal Observatory. Looking back over an extraordinary London landscape, we spied one discordant bump – the Millennium Dome. I must say I tend to agree with the Prince of Wales about that, and I think, ladies and gentlemen, that the success of our celebration this evening of Trafalgar's 200th may in the end surpass the poor old Dome's celebration of the significance of the new millennium (for goodness sake). But I am being churlish?

What especially strikes me about the Battle of Trafalgar is its decisiveness: decisive in execution, decisive in consequence: and that may be thought notable in our post-Iraqi war

world. The victory at Trafalgar did not leave a lot of detail to be mopped up – well days' or weeks' worth, I suppose, not many months or years.

It has been called the most decisive naval battle in history. It lasted that day from 11.50am to 5pm. With his mere 27 ships of the line, against a numerically superior Franco/Spanish fleet of 33, including the largest ship in the world, the 136 gun Santissima Trinidad, Nelson demolished his opposition with remarkably unorthodox tactics.

In the first place Nelson brought them to battle, as it were: he made the battle happen, on the best terms for his side – he chased the evasive Villeneuve as his fleet left the harbour at Cadiz. Nelson was confident his men would bring superior battle skills to bear: they had been at sea continuously for a long time honing their skills, whereas the French and Spanish had been skulking in safe havens, decaying, bottled up in port – figuratively that is.

Then the master tactician employed his highly unusual and potentially dangerous battle plan, carefully canvassed in advance with his officers: he heads for the French and Spanish fleet in predictable fashion, but fools them, "breaking through their line in two formations, sailing across them, right in among them, cutting the greater part off and destroying them" (Villiers p 18).

The destruction was effected by "a series of ferocious, bloody ship-to-ship close quarter fights, in which the best men and the best fighting ships must win" (p 31): they did, and they were the English. This has been gloriously recorded in W M Turner's "The Battle of Trafalgar" which hangs in the Tate in London. And what a victory! Of 33 French and Spanish ships, 17 surrendered and the French Achille went down. No British ship was lost. The French lost 3,000 killed and 1,000 wounded. The British lost 449 including Nelson himself.

A musketeer firing from the mizzen-top of the French Redoutable killed him. As the little Admiral, dying, was carried to the surgeon below decks, he instructed that a handkerchief

cover his face and decorations so his sailors would not recognize him and be distracted (Villiers p 62): true leader to the end.

Before he died, he knew of his grand triumph. As the log of the Victory records: "Firing continued until 4.30 when, the victory having been reported to the Rt Hon Lord Viscount Nelson KB and Commander-in-Chief, he died." And then symbolically, the ships gathered, with the Victory at the centre of a loose circle.

The Spanish Admiral Gravina, mortally wounded himself, fled to Cadiz. There he learnt of the death of Nelson. His words in response are marvellously telling: "I am a dying man, but I die happy. I am going, I hope and trust, to join Nelson, the greatest hero the world has produced" (Villiers p 68).

And likewise, during World War 2, as the British confronted the menace of another despot, British admirals and captains kept but one talisman in their cabins, a statuette or painting of Nelson (Villiers p 91).

Decisive in execution, decisive in consequence! In 1805, Napoleon Bonaparte had been poised to take England. For years he had menaced Europe. His splendid armies of the energized post-revolutionary France had overrun Europe: directly or through allies, he had come to control France itself, Portugal, Spain, modern day Belgium and The Netherlands, and large parts of Switzerland, Germany and Italy. But the prized England remained inviolate. To take England, he needed superior sea power, to control the Channel and facilitate the crossing of his Grand Armée. And so to Napoleon, Trafalgar was an irrevocable disaster (Villiers p 84). He was left cut off, pinned in to Europe.

On the other hand, through ruling the waves, Britannia became rich and powerful beyond measure. Unhindered trade harvested massive wealth. Nelson had foreseen and intended that very result.

And but a decade on, French land armies were finally crushed at Waterloo (Villiers p 85). The victory of Wellington and his Prussian allies would not have been possible without Trafalgar. Waterloo led into a century of peace and settled living in Europe, with the Industrial Revolution and the spreading of trade routes, and the burgeoning of the United States and, indeed, Australia.

In 1805, our Australian settlement was but 17 years old. French naval officers had been sailing here, looking to establish new Pacific bases. Napoleonic France gazed covetously on the rich trade of the Indian Ocean (Villiers p 85). Trafalgar destroyed those pretensions. Trafalgar conclusively put an end to French aspirations in relation to this part of the world.

Trafalgar, the most decisive naval battle in history, tactically, strategically and for its consequence. Admiral Horatio Viscount Nelson, sometimes called "the greatest Admiral in the world", and at the very least, as the poet Lord Byron put it, "Britannia's God of War".

I shall stop now lest I come to resemble a long-playing record of Scottish country dance music or the piano rags of Scott Joplin (Bowler: The Superior Persons Book of Words, p 68).

But before resuming my seat, ladies and gentlemen, it is my particular honour, in this bicentennial year, to ask that you charge your glasses, rise, and drink with me, to the "immortal memory" of Admiral Horatio Nelson…