

## **TRAFALGAR DAY ADDRESS UNITED SERVICES CLUB, 20 OCTOBER 2006**

Je vous remercie de m'avoir invité à prendre la parole ce soir. C'est un honneur pour moi que de m'adresser à une assemblée si distinguée.

For those of you who speak French, I have just thanked you for the invitation to address such a distinguished audience. I have just returned from Canada where every public speaker, no matter how small the audience and how humble the occasion, is obliged to express part of his remarks in French. The obligation is social not legal but it is universally acknowledged. Its origin is to be found in Canadian history: Quebec was a French colony from 1608 until 1759 when General Wolf captured the capital in one of the stunning successes of the Seven Years War. The former French colonists were, unusually, allowed to retain their language and religion. Canada is bilingual as a sign of national unity.

I mention this point because I wondered what could be said about the Battle of Trafalgar that is new. The circumstances of the battle itself and the strategic implications of the victory to British military and commercial interests are well known, especially to this audience.

It occurred to me that an amusing account of what Australia might be like had the battle gone the other way and the French emerged victorious might be possible. Ultimately Napoleon would have been defeated, though Europe may have remained engulfed in war beyond 1815. Napoleon's empire could not have outlasted him: it would surely have collapsed like Alexander's and for the same reasons. In the meantime, though, a confident French empire

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possessing an intact and victorious fleet may well have sought to take possession of part of the Australian continent.

This is not, I think, far fetched. The French navy had an extensive record of exploration in the Pacific, and its voyages of discovery rivalled those of Cook and Flinders. There is also no doubt that the French as a nation deeply resented the loss of their North American and Indian colonies as a result of the Seven Years War. An aggressive Napoleon with command of the seas is not likely to have flinched from conquering Britain's newest colony.

The first French explorer, Marion Dufresne explored Tasmania and anchored near Hobart in March 1772. Unhappily he went on to New Zealand where he was eaten by Maoris. In 1788, as is well known, La Perouse arrived in Botany Bay only six days after the first fleet. His ships left in March 1788 and were never seen again.

Three years later the French sent an expedition under Bruny d'Entrecasteaux to search for La Perouse. His two ships, La Recherche and L'Esperance, arrived in Tasmania in April 1792 where significant geographical features are named after the Recherche and her captain. He circumnavigated Australia and returned to Tasmania in January 1793.

These were voyages of exploration and not of conquest.

The next French expedition, in 1800, had a more serious mission, from our Anglo-Saxon point of view. It was led by Nicholas Baudin and was sent by a French government now controlled by its restless and ambitious first consul,

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Napoleon. Ostensibly also a voyage of discovery, there appear to have been mixed motives for it. Baudin arrived off Western Australia in May 1801 and arrived in Tasmania in January 1802. He then sailed north across Bass Strait and west along the southern coast of Australia. As you all know he met Flinders at the bay now named Encounter, and the two commanders compared charts and discoveries.

Baudin's voyage has always been controversial. It seems clear that he had no instructions to claim any Australian territory for France but the ambitions of some of his subordinates appear equally clear. You will remember that when Baudin's ships put into Sydney harbour French conversation about territorial ambitions led Governor King to send an officer to hurriedly declare British sovereignty over Tasmania in front of Baudin and his officers.

Baudin did not survive the voyage but the publication of his subordinate's journal showed the French had serious designs upon the coastline of southern Australia. French charts designated the area between Ceduna and Western Port as Terre Napoleon, Napoleon Land. It stretched 3,000 miles and was said to be 'entirely unknown' before the French discovery. These charts, which were published three years before the British could get Flinders' maps into print, ignored or displaced his investigation and gave every prominent headland, bay, gulf and creek a grand Gallic name. The Secretary to the Admiralty wrote at the time that the claims gave rise to a strong suspicion of a French purpose to claim 'at some future day ... this part of New Holland'.

The claim never materialised. The French capacity to make it disappeared with its fleet at Trafalgar. It is by no means certain that Napoleon would have pressed the claim had his fleet remained intact. It is commonly accepted that

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one of his signal failures was that he never fully comprehended the importance of sea power and the use of the navy as an implement of strategy. Nevertheless it remains an intriguing speculation that, if the British fleet had been mauled at Trafalgar, the French ambition, which certainly existed in some quarters, to establish Terre Napoleon and make a new France in southern Australia, would have been realised. What social and cultural effects on this country there might have been! More than a part of Collins Street would have been Parisian. Coonawarra and Barossa would have been settled by French not Germans. My generation would have had a different introduction to wine: our first taste would have been Moet, not Barossa Pearl. The rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney would have had a sharper edge. One would have needed a passport to row across the Murray.

I take these speculations no further. They are too idle for the serious address which this occasion calls for.

There remains the challenge to find something new to say. You are all at least as familiar with the details of the battle and its strategic implications as I am. In an endeavour to overcome the difficulty I bought and read a number of books which were published to mark last year's bicentenary of the battle. In fact I bought one book twice – but only because it was published under two different titles. It was written by Adam Nicolson and does offer some new insights into the causes of British victory. I can only hope that none of you has read it.

The basic facts of Trafalgar are well known. A British fleet of 27 ships of the line outmanoeuvred and outfought 33 larger ships. The French admiral was indecisive and irresolute. Nelson was both bold and brave. What happened

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was not complicated. A highly ambitious, confident and aggressive English battle fleet attacked a larger one whose morale was broken, whose command was divided, and inflicted an overwhelming defeat.

But why was victory so total? Why were the French and Spanish navies, each of which had a long and dignified naval tradition, so devoid of fighting spirit? What made the English so confident and so aggressive?

The answer does not lie in Nelson's tactics, which were not novel. He directed his fleet in two columns to cut the line of the combined fleet in its centre and rear and so detach the French van from the battle, reducing the numbers of enemy ships actually engaged. But those tactics had been used by British admirals in the past: by Rodney in 1782 and Howe in 1794. At least one Spanish captain saw the plan unfold and saw how to counter it. The fleets approached each other at a walking pace in light winds. The focus of Nelson's attack was clear as was the means of counter-attack: to signal the 12 ships in the van to turn on a reciprocal course to join the battle, and envelop the English ships as they crossed the French line. In fact Villeneuve did give such a signal but far too late. It was ignored except by the *Intrepide* whose ferocious captain turned to join the battle and fought with unequalled bravery. The other ships in the van turned later but sailed past at a safe distance and when it was too late to affect the outcome of the battle.

One explanation for the lack of cohesion in the combined fleet was that its command was divided and the allies disliked each other. The French considered the Spanish incompetent and the Spanish thought the French were treacherous. Spain was a reluctant ally. The Spanish monarchy detested the

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French revolutionary government and changed its opinion only when Napoleon led an army into Spain and compelled allegiance by force. Spanish resentment ran deep.

According to Nicolson the difference between the two fleets has its explanation in the different societies which provided the crews.

In 1805 Spain was deeply conservative, royalist and Catholic. The Enlightenment and Revolution had not touched it. It had no middle class but enormous numbers of desperately poor, landless peasants. There was a proud hereditary aristocracy which provided officers for the Spanish navy. The men came from the ranks of the dispossessed peasantry. This division between plebeians and patricians and the social gulf between them, made for obvious inefficiencies in running a highly complex man of war. There was a lack of good, strong, well fed men with a sense of enterprise. The crews included 'goatherds and the sweepings of Cadiz.' One poor fellow was seized from the stage of a theatre. After the battle he was found still dressed as a harlequin. The untrained mass of ill assorted peasantry who manned the Spanish guns could fire one round every five minutes from their thirty-two pound cannon. British crews could fire a round every ninety seconds.

The French navy had been neglected for much of the eighteenth century. With the exception of its striking successes during the American war of independence it had been consistently outfought by the Royal Navy. It suffered from a systematic failure in naval administration and lacked an effective central board of control, like the admiralty. The man in charge, the Admiral of France, was a royal duke who had never been on a ship and regarded the navy only as a useful source of income. In 1801 the admiral in

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command of the channel fleet in Brest wrote in despair to the Minister to call his attention again to the ‘terrible state in which the men are left, unpaid for fifteen months, naked or covered in rags, badly fed ... sunk under the weight of the deepest and most humiliating wretchedness.’

High command was given to the well connected. Naval competence was not a prerequisite. Only three of twenty-two vice-admirals promoted between 1715 and 1789 had ever commanded fleets at sea and less than a third of lieutenant-generals, an important fleet position, had held sea-going commands. Though not to the same extent as in Spain, the French officer class was largely aristocratic and their education reflected it. They had daily classes in dancing and fencing but were not taught ‘how to steer a ship, reef a sail, splice a warp or make’ any of the numerous knots English naval officers learnt as midshipmen.

The Revolution added a further level of disarray to the French fleet. Liberty, equality and fraternity are destructive of discipline. Authority was replaced by voluntary compliance and crews regularly refused to respond to commands even when their refusal put the ship in danger. Officers found it impossible to command and many simply left their posts. The Republic’s attempt to re-instil discipline took a ferocious form. Guillotines were set up on pontoons positioned among the fleet whose crews were summoned to observe the punishment of the mutinous. A naval reign of terror was instituted.

By contrast the English drew their crews, officers and men, from a cohesive society and one with far less social rigidity. There was no division as between aristocrat and peasant. It was natural for English officers to accept responsibility for the welfare of their men.

The English had another advantage: the composition of their officer class. It was predominantly middle or professional class or lesser aristocracy. The Royal Navy was itself professional: its members had joined as a means of advancement. Success in battle brought honours, promotion and wealth from prizes. There was rigorous training for officers and men and promotion could come by merit. English officers had a psychological and financial incentive to seek out battle and to win. Ambition and greed drew them on.

Coupled with positive incentives the British officer had much to fear from a defeat. Voltaire was right when he said that Admiral Byng was shot to encourage the others. Admiral Calder who had encountered Villeneuve's fleet some weeks before Trafalgar only halfheartedly engaged it. He was recalled in disgrace. The same thing happened to Admiral Orde who did not risk his small squadron against the vastly larger French and Spanish fleets which sailed from Cadiz to the West Indies. He was removed from his command, never given another, and subjected to expressions of public loathing.

By contrast an officer who was an aristocrat had no such incentive, positive or negative. Failure in battle did not erode his wealth, standing or honour. As long as he had behaved with courage he remained the man he was born to be, whether victorious or vanquished.

As an explanation for the different attitudes to war, and the different levels of desire to win, the theory can be tested by the behaviour of the one English commander on whom the incentives of his brother officers had no effect. The third English admiral was the Earl of North Esk who had unexpectedly obtained the title on the death of his older brother. He commanded the reserve



squadron. His flag ship was the Britannia. He was demonstrably reluctant to join the battle. As his ship approached the engagement he ordered his captain to reduce sail to delay their involvement. His ship did not engage the enemy closely. As Nicolson points out:

‘Unlike nearly everyone else at Trafalgar, North Esk had more to lose – life and limbs – than to gain. Secure in his position he was not subject to the mechanics of honour. Dishonourable behaviour was for him a rational choice in a way it was not for the captains around him who needed to stake all for glory and riches.’

This societal analysis as an explanation for the difference between the two sides is interesting, and probably valid. But the critical difference between the fleets, and the key to British success, I think is to be found in the calibre and temperament of the two commanders, Nelson and Villeneuve. The Frenchman was a grand aristocrat, well bred, reserved, exquisitely dressed and perfectly mannered. He was educated and intelligent but, in Napoleon’s harsh judgment, a coward in thought. He was too refined for the brutality of war.

Nelson was the son of a parson. He had many qualities, good and bad, but the essence of the man was animal courage and unbridled aggression. It dictated Nelson’s approach to Trafalgar (and indeed his other battles). His plan was simple. It was to break the enemy’s line of battle, and to mix his ships with the enemy’s in what he called a ‘pell mell battle’ so that the opposing admiral would lose control. The battle would develop into a number of separate conflicts in which Nelson relied upon the superior seamanship and gunnery of his crews and the initiative of his captains to beat their individual adversaries.

The method was described, at the time, by the head of the Spanish Naval Secretariat. He said:

‘An Englishman enters a naval action with the firm conviction that his duty is to hurt his enemies and help his friends and allies without looking out for directions in the midst of the fight and while he ... clears his mind of all ... distractions he rests in confidence on the certainty that his comrades ... will be bound by the ... principle of mutual support. ... On the contrary ... a Frenchman or Spaniard working under a system which leans to formality and strict order being maintained in battle has no feelings for mutual support, and goes into action with hesitation, preoccupied with the anxiety of seeing or hearing the commander in chief’s signals ...’.

One naval historian described Nelson’s tactics as a ‘return to the primitive: the headlong charge and the melee. (He) seems to insist not so much upon defeating the enemy by concentration as by throwing him into confusion ...’.

Nelson knew he could win by that means. A French naval historian wrote that ‘the genius of Nelson was to have understood our weakness.’ Another assessment was that Nelson’s tactics were ‘the tactics of disdain’.

This, then, is the ‘Nelson touch’, impetuous attack and the bold exhortation to engage the enemy closely and persist until he is defeated.

It is surely right that many conditions must exist, and coalesce, if an army or navy is to conquer in battle. What Trafalgar suggests is that the additional

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factor needed for complete victory is a genius for battle in its commander in chief.

I give you a toast – to the immortal memory of Lord Nelson.