The Royal Navy's Blockade System 1793-1805: A Tactical Paradox

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Throughout the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain relied heavily upon its maritime forces, known collectively as the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy's blockade of the European continent during this period thwarted Napoleon Bonaparte's ambitions for the invasion of Great Britain, cut France off from its overseas resources and facilitated England's rapid imperial and economic growth.[1] The blockade system, however, only became a viable strategy once Great Britain had achieved naval supremacy over France following the Battle of Trafalgar. Prior to this pivotal moment, the Royal Navy's blockade system had put its ships at a tactical disadvantage against enemy vessels. This fundamental flaw, masked by the broader successes of the blockade system, was only overcome by the skill of the Royal Navy's ablest admirals and captains.

There were numerous difficulties that blockading squadrons had to contend with while at sea. Ports enjoy the luxury of concentrated land and naval defences, making attack impractical. Blockading squadrons had to cope with bad weather, which could drive them from their positions and allow enemy fleets opportunities to escape port — or enter port. The blockade system was ruinous to the ships, hard on the morale of seamen, and incredibly expensive. Blockades also robbed the Royal Navy of public support throughout the Wars because they inhibited significant fleet actions from occurring.[2]

The Royal Navy's greatest strength was its prowess in battle. Its men were better trained than those of their adversaries; at the time of the Revolutionary War, British gun crews could fire three times faster than the French crews.[3] This allowed the British to capture far more French and Spanish ships than they lost throughout the Wars, despite the inferior designs of the Royal Navy's vessels. The French and Spanish men-of-war had broader beams and deeper droughts, which meant that they were larger, sturdier, and capable of carrying far greater armaments.[4] The Spaniards' monstrous men-of-war that stood four decks tall, such as the *Santissima Trinidada* and the *Santa Anna*, were exemplars of the technical advantage which Britain's adversaries enjoyed.[5] That these two vessels sunk following the Battle of Trafalgar shows the mastery of the Royal Navy at open-water engagements.[6]

The Royal Navy's blockade system counteracted their advantage at sea because it discouraged French and Spanish ships from leaving port, meaning decisive open-water conflicts could not occur.[7] The Royal Navy kept a constant presence outside its enemy's ports to prevent hostile expeditions against Great Britain. By doing so, the British contained their adversaries but allowed them to maintain a fleet in being: not active, but always ready to become so. The British would commit the same tactical error during the First World War — despite being under blockade, Germany's *Hochseeflotte* posed a continuous threat to Britain's merchant navy, until it was thoroughly diminished at the Battle of Jutland.[8] Regardless of the historic period, Britain's naval enemies were predominantly safe under a blockade system, and furthermore posed a constant threat to British domestic and foreign interests.[9]

Many of the Royal Navy's most prominent figures recognized these tactical deficiencies, and thus despised the blockade system. This included Richard Howe, who, as Admiral of the fleet, held the Royal Navy's highest rank. During his correspondence with Lord Chatham, Howe argued that the Royal Navy should keep its fleets anchored within the relative safety of friendly ports, with only frigates acting as sentinels to watch the enemy's coast for movement.[10] This method ultimately encouraged open-water naval battles. It would be easier for enemy fleets to put to sea without British men-of-war anchored off of their ports — but their movements would be relayed back to the Royal Navy, who would then move its fleets to intercept. Howe reasoned that:

> (…) the two contending fleets might then engage on something like equal terms, as to their state and condition, each of them fresh from their respective ports; whereas a blockading squadron, keeping the sea for months without being relieved, and exposed to all kinds of weather, ought not to be considered on a par with an enemy of equal force fresh from a port, and still less in a condition to follow them, perhaps to a foreign station (…)[11]

Howe's confidence in the Royal Navy's prowess was well-founded, for he himself had been involved in a victorious action against a larger fleet early in the French Revolutionary War.[12] On May 2, 1794, Admiral Howe (then the commander-in-chief of the Channel fleet) had put to sea from Port St. Helens with twenty-two men-of-war and six frigates in search of a French convoy that he had heard was coming back from North America and the West Indies.[13] Howe's intelligence was validated when, on May 19, an American vessel out of Brest reported that a French fleet composed of twenty-four men-of-war and ten frigates had left two days earlier to protect their valuable homeward-bound convoy.[14] Outnumbered by six ships, Howe nonetheless set off, and on May 25, he destroyed two French corvettes that had mistaken his ships for their own convoy. Knowing that the French were close, Howe steered northwards until on May 28, several of his advance frigates spotted the opposing fleet far to the south-east. Howe gave chase and was rewarded when the *Revolutionaire*, a three-deck warship, struck its flag by the end of this first day.[15]

Howe spent the beginning of the following day enduring shots directed at his van; the French fleet would pull away, then haul their wind and concentrate their fire upon the leading British ships before again fleeing.[16] He decided at noon to give the signal to break through the French line, but after this maneuver was completed, the British found themselves too dispersed to be able to concentrate on any portion of the segmented French fleet. May 30 and 31 were spent recovering from the confusion, which was prolonged due to particularly foggy conditions. On the morning of June 1, however, the French admiral decided to haul to the wind and form a line with his twenty-six sail (some ships had joined the French fleet from nearby ports while others had become separated).[17]

The action between the two fleets ensued at nine in the morning. After a little more than one hour of furious fighting, the French admiral decided to flee northward where he again formed a line with roughly a dozen of his ships. Noticing this, ten more French ships bore away to join their comrades; Admiral Howe's fleet was too dispersed, and had sustained too much damage to their masts and rigging to prevent the escape. Seven French ships, however, were too crippled to flee, and were thus abandoned to be seized by the British.[18] The British vessels could be repaired, but the French had lost a significant portion of their naval force by abandoning them to Howe's fleet.

Admiral Howe's gallant victory, dubbed "the Glorious First of June," exemplified the Royal Navy's prowess and revealed why many of its most prominent figures abhorred a blockade system designed to avoid similar battles. One such man was Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood, who had been present on that occasion sailing under Admiral Howe as (then) Captain of the *Barfleur*.[19] Unbeknownst to him at the time, Collingwood was destined to spend the remainder of his life fighting the French. From the beginning of the French Revolutionary War in 1793 to his death in 1810, Collingwood spent all but one year at sea. It was a fitting culmination to a perilous fifty-year career — the seasoned Vice-Admiral had served forty-four years abroad in active employment by the end of his life.[20] As a dedicated servant of country and cause, Collingwood's disapproval of the blockade system lent significant credence against its tactical efficiency.

Collingwood's disdain of blockading grew steadily throughout the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In April 1796, Collingwood joined the blockade off Toulon and quickly realized how monotonous the entire affair would be. In a letter written from the *Excellent* on May 11, 1796 to J. E. Blackett, Collingwood described the situation this way: "(…) [the French] cannot move a ship without our seeing them, which must be very mortifying to them; but we have the mortification also to see their merchant-vessels going along shore, and cannot molest them."[21] French land batteries and heavy moveable artillery units prevented Collingwood from getting close enough to the shore to disrupt French shipping in any meaningful way. The role of his fleet, with its powerful men-of-war, had been largely reduced to merely observing the French lying in port.

As the blockade of Toulon went on, this monotony grew to be a very real danger to the British ships because of France's exploits on land. Collingwood wrote another letter to Blackett on September 25 of that year explaining that the French had closed the ports at Leghorn and Genoa to the Royal Navy, which meant that his fleet would have difficulty securing the supplies they needed to maintain their health. On December 5, Collingwood expressed his fears that his fleet could possibly be trapped in Porto Ferraio if they were not cautious, for it was the Royal Navy's only friendly port left in the region following the evacuation of Corsica. Collingwood insisted that his fleet could beat the enemy's if they met at sea, but the threat of the enemy waiting instead to corner the British once they had to resupply was too great to continue the blockade.[22]

While Collingwood's experiences blockading Toulon exemplified the dangers of waiting outside an enemy's port while war waged on inland, his experiences off Cadiz illustrated the difficulties of bringing a blockaded enemy to battle. Collingwood's frustrations with Cadiz were apparent on January 26, 1798: he had been goading the enemy's fleet of thirty men-of-war by cruising with just six of his own, yet was consistently denied release from boredom by the enemy's ardent refusal to sail from their port. Collingwood had received intelligence indicating that the Cadiz fleet planned to join twenty-six other line-of-battle ships from Carthagena and Toulon. He could do little to prevent this dangerous possibility because Collingwood had become convinced that the Cadiz fleet would only move when they were certain they could avoid battle at sea.[23] The soldiers aboard his ships were growing so restless from the lack of action that Collingwood had to resort to creative distractions to quell their agitated states.

> We have lately been making musical instruments, and now have a very good band. Every moonlight night the sailors dance; and there seems as much mirth and festivity as if we were in Wapping itself. One night the rats had destroyed the bagpipes we made, by eating up the bellows; but they suffer for it, for in revenge we have made traps of all constructions, and have declared a war of extermination against them.[24]

While the enemy (meaning the French and Spanish ships, not the rats), whose numbers were vastly superior to his own, would not come out to meet him, Collingwood was also apprehensive of bringing the battle to their port for fear of their gun-boats. Mounted with heavy cannons and propelled by oars and sail, these tiny vessels were able to avoid most of the fire that line-of-battle ships and frigates could offer them. The gun-boats were also far more maneuverable in light winds and shallow waters, which robbed the Royal Navy's larger vessels of much of their speed and dexterity.[25] A stalemate was thus inevitable, for neither side was willing to initiate any sort of action.

Such stalemates often gave the tactical advantage to the fleet anchored in port, as was made evident by Collingwood's dismayed letters to Blackett on December 9, 1798 and August 18, 1799. Dejected, Collingwood wrote on the ninth that the French could set sail from their ports almost at will, noting that a fleet had joined the Spaniards off Carthagena.[26] The latter correspondence was as follows:

> In all reasonable expectation, the French fleet ought not to have escaped us; and I had always hopes of our coming up with them, until we sailed into Port Mahon, which is a very narrow harbour, from which you cannot get out without great difficulty. There we remained, until the enemy had got so far the start, that it was not possible to come up with them. We arrived at Brest the day after them, and finding them snug, came [to Torbay]; - at all which there has been great lamentation in the fleet.[27]

Despite the considerable efforts that had gone into containing the enemy fleets, they had managed to escape and travel through the Straits of Gibraltar, and then a considerable distance northwards along the coast of Spain and France.

It appears the only measure that could have been taken within the blockade system to prevent the escape of such a combined fleet was to have attacked them in their own ports. Lord Horatio Nelson, who was arguably the Royal Navy's most influential commander of the period, was the only British officer who would achieve any considerable success at doing so in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. He had attacked and defeated an enemy's port on two separate occasions: the first outside Alexandria, and the second at Copenhagen.[28]

Nelson's encounter outside Alexandria in August of 1798 had been the culmination of a long and arduous pursuit. On April 30, 1798, Earl St. Vincent had detached Nelson from his duties before Cadiz so that he could watch French forces at Toulon.[29] Earlier that year, Nelson had mentioned in passing to his wife that "Buonaparte is gone back to Italy, where 80,000 men are embarking for some Expedition."[30] He would go on to pursue this expedition for four months. While sailing for Toulon, Nelson's squadron captured the French corvette *la Pierre*, which divulged that

> The French General, Buonaparte, arrived at Toulon ten days ago, to command the secret Expedition preparing to sail from that port (…) It was not, however, generally believed that Buonaparte would embark; but no one knows to what place the Armament is destined. Nineteen sail of the line are in the harbour, and fifteen are apparently fitted for sea: yet it is said, that only six are to sail with the transports now ready, and that 12,000 men are now embarked.[31]

Nelson's unique vigour was made apparent by a private note that he added in his letter to his patron, Lord St. Vincent, which read "Be assured I will fight the French fleet the moment I can find them;

until then adieu."[32] It was this determination to not only fulfill his duty, but to destroy his enemy that separated Nelson from his colleagues and allowed him to succeed in a blockade system predisposed to stalemates.

When Nelson finally arrived at Toulon on June 4 after a month marked by a violent squall, there were no French ships to be seen. With neither instructions nor intelligence on what to do next, Nelson decided to sail for Corsica, following the northwest wind that he assumed the French had also taken. After he again found nothing, Nelson steered towards Naples, and was finally rewarded on June 20 with information that the British consul at Malta had surrendered to the French. While on course to Malta, Nelson was rewarded with a second instance of luck, when a Genoese brig reported on June 22 that the French had sailed four days prior from Malta at the head of a northwest gale. Deducing correctly that the enemy was aiming for Egypt, Nelson took off in that direction.[33]

In an unfortunate occurrence of mistiming, Nelson arrived at Alexandria on June 29 only to find a governor shocked that he was chasing a French fleet. Puzzled that his enemy had not arrived, the admiral set off on a course that took him past several islands on the way to the port at Syracuse in Sicily, which ironically made him miss the French fleet a second time. On July 25, Nelson would again sail for Egypt only after receiving assurances that the French fleet had gone to neither the Archipelago, the Adriatic, nor the Mediterranean. Nelson finally got his ultimate reward when on August 1, he again came within sight of Alexandria, and at four in the afternoon received a signal that the approach to the city was full of French ships.[34]

Nelson's fleet had found sixteen ships anchored in Aboukir Bay. Their defensive position gave them the decided advantage against any attack, with only their artillery to focus their attention on whilst the British would have to navigate the narrow harbour under heavy fire. Nevertheless, at a quarter past six in the morning on August 2, the first British ships approached their enemy, receiving fire from the van ships, coastal batteries and gun boats. Nelson ordered his fleet to double the French line, and within twelve minutes, the French *Guerrier* had lost its masts. The *Conquerant* was dismasted just ten minutes later.[35]

Losses were severe for both the British and the French. Nelson anchored his *Vanguard* on the other side of the enemy's line, and within just a few minutes, "every man stationed at the first six guns in the forepart of the *Vanguard's* deck, were all either killed or wounded, and one gun in particular was repeatedly cleared."[36] So ferocious was the action that at nine in the morning, the French flagship *L'Orient* caught fire. It fought on for thirty-seven minutes until the flames finally ignited its magazines, causing the "*L'Orient* to [blow] up with a crashing sound that deafened all around her. The tremulous motion, felt to the very bottom of each ship, was like that of an earthquake."[37] The massive explosion silenced both sides for a few minutes, until the French began shooting again at a frenetic pace, spurred on by their anger and grief.[38]

The fighting laboured on until three o'clock the next morning, when both sides stopped, exhausted. This second break lasted only an hour, until the *Alexander* and *Majestic* resumed their attacks on the *Tonnant*, *Guillaume Tell*, *Genereux*, and *Timoleon*. More British ships steadily joined the fray, and the two sides continuously bombarded each other until Rear-Admiral Villeneuve cut the cable of the *Guillaume Tell* at eleven in the morning and made off with the *Genereux* and two frigates. The British ships, too crippled to follow, resolved themselves to securing the spoils of their victory. They had captured a total of eleven men-of-war and two frigates, more than in any other naval victory of the Napoleonic Wars.[39]

The victory at Aboukir Bay brought praise to both the Royal Navy and Lord Nelson.[40] He had managed to assault and defeat a fleet of heavily-defended ships in harbor, with just one of his own having to strike its flag after running into the rocky bottom of a particularly shallow portion of the bay.[41] Nelson would prove his merit again almost three years later when on April 2, 1801, he led an attack on Copenhagen harbour, whose defences were even greater than those he had encountered off Alexandria.[42] Copenhagen had been defended by

> (…) six sail of the line, eleven floating batteries, mounting from 26 twenty-four pounders to 18 eighteen pounders, one bomb ship and schooner gun vessel. These were supported by the Crown islands, mounting 88 pieces of cannon, four sail of the line moored across the mouth of the harbour, and batteries on the island of Amok.[43]

With just twelve ships, Nelson plunged headlong into a hail of Danish fire. Three of his ships, the *Bellona*, *Russel*, and *Polyphemus*, were immediately taken out of the action, running aground in the shallow and narrow water.[44] The *Bellona* and *Russel* did not quit however. They were "within range of shot, and continued to fire with much spirit upon such of the Enemy's ships as they could reach."[45] The perseverance of the *Bellona* and *Russel* could have been attributed to Nelson's leadership; he trusted the capabilities of all the men sailing under him, and always encouraged them to take initiative if they came upon an opportunity that deviated from his battle orders.[46]

The battle began five minutes after ten in the morning. Nelson maneuvered his own ship, the *Elephant*, into the centre of the action, with one British ship astern and three ahead.[47] Neither side had gained any decided advantage by one in the afternoon, at which point Sir Hyde Parker, aboard the *London*, gave the signal for the British ships to withdraw from the fight. Nelson ignored this signal for a moment, and then gave the order to simply acknowledge it rather than repeat it, and then carried on his bombardment of the Danish defences.[48] After four hours of desperate fighting, in which droves of Danish reinforcements strove to keep the British at bay, Nelson was finally able to subdue the defences and secure a truce that ended Denmark's part in the Second Coalition.[49]

Lord Nelson was a remarkably successful naval officer, but his prowess alone could not make up for the flaws of the Royal Navy's blockade system. An entire tactical system cannot rely on the ingenuity of a single man. Lord Nelson had been an unusually aggressive, ambitious and insightful individual. Nelson's peers, although distinguished and proven in their own rights, simply could not fight in the same way he did. The frustrated efforts of a Captain Peter Puget (who had been employed in the blockade of Brest) to organize an attack on the moored French ships characterized the difficulties that men without Nelson's abilities faced when trying to work within the blockade system.

Puget had first proposed his idea of using fire ships — vessels deliberately set afire and steered into enemy formations — to destroy the French fleet at Brest on June 23, 1804, in a letter to Admiral Cornwallis. Enclosed in his letter had been an incredibly detailed report which outlined the specific number and class of ships that would be needed for the operation, along with the requisite number of men, equipment and sailing conditions. Puget asked for:

> (…) ten brigs from 100 to 130 tons each, and three sloops from 50 to 60 tons each (…) They should be supplied with grapnels and chains, as also with two fast-rowing six-oared Deal boats (…) Two captains, ten lieutenants, ten master's mates, ten midshipmen, with a hundred seamen, would be sufficient to conduct the brigs; three lieutenants, three midshipmen, and eighteen seamen, the sloops; in all 156 persons, the whole to be volunteers.[50]

With this force, Puget argued that:

> The best time for making the

> attempt to destroy the enemy's fleet in Brest appears to be in the last quarter of the flood tide, on a starlight night, with the wind blowing a commanding breeze from the N.W., or, indeed, further to the westward, for the boats could always secure their retreat with the assistance of the ebb tide.[51]

Puget also explained the path that the attacking squadron should take to reach the enemy, the order by which the fire ships should attach themselves to the enemy, and the exact steps that should be followed in securing a retreat.

> In going in, the fire-brigs should keep close under the north shore, on the principle that the nearer the vessels are carried to the enemy's batteries, the effect of red-hot shot would be lessened, for they would pass through both sides, instead of lodging (…)
>
> (…) form the brigs in a loose, compact line. When the leading vessels had arrived off the battery of Portzic, they should, with the first division, haul up for the Southern part of the French fleet; the second division for the northern part (…) The fire-brigs should be on board the enemy, if possible, a quarter of an hour before high water, for it would be of essential benefit in assisting them to maintain their station (…) It would also be the means of more effectively spreading the flames, as with the flood tide and wind (…)[52]

His meticulous efforts were rewarded when, on August 17, Cornwallis gave his consent for the plan to proceed.[53]

Per Cornwallis' letter, the eight fire ships that were to attack Brest should have prepared to rendezvous with their squadron by August 29. Just three days before this date however, Lord Melville of the Admiralty wrote to Cornwallis to inform him of the plan's first delay. Inspectors had examined the fire vessels and had proposed that some of the ships should be substituted, meaning that all of them would have to wait before setting sail. Melville would write again on September 5 to announce that the vessels were finally ready, but a shift in winds to the westward two days later slowed the arrival of the fire ships further.[54]

The result of these delays was Cornwallis' orders on September 29 and 30, which instructed the lieutenants of the gun-vessels and cutter that were to comprise the retinue of fire ships to return to their previous stations, effectively cancelling Puget's plan.[55] In another letter on October 16 addressed to Lord Melville, Cornwallis explained that

> The particular service had unavoidably been delayed considerably beyond the time, and Captain Puget had observed that the enemy had changed their position as well as some gun-vessels. The unfavourable opinion of the sea officers of the [Naval] Board did also dampen the ardour of some.[56]

Captain Puget, unlike Nelson, had not been free to attack off his own initiative when the opportunity had been available. His proposition had been vulnerable to unforeseen delays, unfavourable weather conditions, and a non-compliant enemy.

The Royal Navy's blockade system certainly did not facilitate engagements with the enemy. Admiral Howe had noticed the negative effects that this inactivity could have on public opinion early in the French Revolutionary War. British newspapers had repeatedly slandered Howe in 1793 because of his failure to bring the enemy to battle. Poor weather had forced the admiral to return to port with the Channel fleet on four separate occasions since he had received his secret instructions on July 1, 1793; the last occasion had forced Howe to retire to Torbay for nearly four months until the necessary repairs were made. Blockades were effective at protecting trade and damaging the enemy's commercial interests, but the public wanted to see their war taxes spent on "the destruction of the enemy."[57]

The blockade system's negative impacts on public opinion were exemplified by the Prime Minister William Pitt's motion on March 15, 1804, for an inquiry into the country's naval administration. This inquiry was meant to prove that Lord St. Vincent, who was First Lord of the Admiralty at the time, had insufficiently prepared the Royal Navy for the defence of Great Britain from invasion.[58] In particular, Pitt had accused the Royal Navy of failing to construct the types of ships that it needed to defend Great Britain, of exerting less effort in fighting the enemy and preparing itself than it had previously in the French Revolutionary War, and in failing to secure enough contracts to build the necessary number of ships of war.[59]

This motion showed that there was fear outside the Royal Navy that Great Britain was in danger, despite its control of the English Channel. In a response to Pitt's accusations, several naval officers proved that his motion had been premised upon false principles. Pitt had believed that gun-vessels were needed to defend Great Britain's shores from invasion when, in reality, the larger vessels that already constituted the Royal Navy's permanent fleet were preferable to execute that task. Frigates and larger vessels could mount a greater proportion of guns, were far more durable than any gun-vessel could be, were immune to being boarded by the French gun-vessels, and required a smaller amount of men to oppose Napoleon's massive invasion flotilla.[60] Napoleon had amassed 130,000 men, over one thousand boats, and 8,500 horses, all spread over seven ports: the major one being Boulogne, with smaller harbours at Vimereaux, Ambleteuse, and Étaples as well as North Sea ports at Calais, Dunkirk, and Ostend.[61] England simply did not have enough men to arm a fleet of gun-vessels large enough to counter Napoleon's; according to the official answer to Pitt's motion, half of the Royal Navy's seamen and marines at the time would have been needed to cover Boulogne alone.[62]

Pitt also argued that gun-vessels were more effective in shallow waters, but the naval officers retorted that there was a far greater proportion of deep water between Great Britain and the European continent that needed to be defended. The capability of gun-vessels to operate near coasts was also of little benefit offensively, for land batteries and heavy moveable artillery units commonly defended enemy ports.[63]

Had the Royal Navy been engaging the French fleets in open waters, rather than allowing them to wait in port, public opinion would likely have been very different. Lord Nelson's most famous victory, the Battle of Trafalgar, by no means ended the threat posed by enemy fleets or Napoleon's invasion ambitions, but it nevertheless convinced the British public that they had been saved from danger.[64] The Brest fleet remained following the battle, and a new one would be raised at Toulon.[65] Furthermore, after subjugating Russia, Austria and Prussia in 1807, Napoleon would once more turn his attention to Great Britain. Russia, Denmark, Norway and Sweden all threatened to oppose the Royal Navy in 1809, yet the magnitude of the Royal Navy's victory at Trafalgar gave the British confidence that they were invulnerable to any further threats that could come over the sea.[66]

The Battle of Trafalgar was fought on October 21, 1805. A combined French and Spanish fleet of thirty-three men-of-war had set sail from Cadiz on October 19, only to be immediately pursued by twenty-seven of their British counterparts. The chase lasted two full nights. At daybreak on October 21, the combined fleet noticed that the British had separated into two columns; the French and Spanish concaved their line in response, so that their rear and van could fire upon the sides of the approaching British ships whilst the middle shot at the British front.[67] The British ships, utterly vulnerable, occasionally fired shots to cover their advance with smoke.[68]

Admiral Collingwood, who was leading

one of the columns aboard the *Royal Sovereign*, broke through the enemy line at noon. A melee of flying splinters, crashing masts and smashing hulls commenced. Collingwood gave the first ship he passed, the *Santa Anna*,

> (…) a broadside and a half into her stern, tearing it down, and killing and wounding 400 of her men; then, with her helm hard a-starboard, she ranged up alongside so closely that the lower yards of the two vessels were locked together. The Spanish Admiral, having seen that it was the intention of the *Royal Sovereign* to engage to leeward, had collected all his strength on the starboard; and such was the weight of the *Santa Anna's* metal, that her first broadside made the *Sovereign* heel two streaks out of the water.[69]

The fury of the moment prevented anyone aboard the *Royal Sovereign* from calculating exactly how long their ship had been fighting alone, but after at least twenty minutes, the other British ships cut through the line as well.[70]

Nelson had led his column in the *Victory* towards the enemy's van in what would come to be known as "the Nelson touch," feinting to mask his true intention of piercing its centre where the flagship under Vice-Admiral Villeneuve was positioned.[71] As he closed in on his adversary, the enemy ships surrounding Villeneuve fired probing shots to gauge Nelson's distance. Then finally "(…) a shot passed through the *Victory's* main-top-gallant-sail; the hole in which being perceived by the Enemy, they immediately opened their broadsides, supporting an awful and tremendous fire."[72] Twenty men were killed and thirty wounded before the *Victory* had even fired a purposeful shot in response.[73]

Nelson's flagship finally crashed through the enemy's line at twenty minutes past noon. The *Victory* ran aboard the *Redoubtable*, the two becoming locked together in a mess of rigging and cannon fire. The *Temeraire* came to Nelson's aid and ran itself aboard the other side of the *Redoubtable*, but not before the *La Fougueux* had managed to run alongside it. The four men-of-war fought on, entangled in the centre of the raging melee. It was during this frenzy that Nelson received his mortal injury, as a French marksman shot him through the left breast.[74]

The fighting lasted three full hours until Admiral Gravina finally broke off with ten ships towards Cadiz. Minor skirmishes only followed, when five of the enemy ships decided to return in an effort to save their comrades. These were beaten off, and the British squadron claimed

> (…) nineteen ships of the line (of which two are first-rates, the *Santissima Trinidada*, and the *Santa Anna*), with three flag-officers, viz. Admiral Villeneuve, the Commander-in-chief; Don Ignacio Maria d'Alava, Vice-admiral; and Rear-admiral Don Baltazar Hidalgo Cisneros.[75]

In the end, three of the enemy's vessels managed to flee back into Cadiz, but these had been reduced to wrecks during the battle. Fourteen ships from the combined fleet were either burnt, sunk, or crashed onto shore, and 20,000 men were taken prisoner.[76] When news of this victory reached Great Britain, the populace broke out into celebration.[77] Their Royal Navy had managed to win a decisive naval engagement against a blockaded enemy. The Battle of Trafalgar was not, however, a product of the blockade system that had been employed up until this point; a unique set of circumstances, along with a conscious effort on behalf of the British to remain hidden led the combined fleet to its decision to set sail and leave Cadiz.

Trafalgar was more a product of Howe's alternative plan to the blockade system.[78] The battle originated not when the combined fleet left port on October 19, but rather on August 20, 1805. Collingwood had been sailing off Cadiz with three men-of-war, one frigate, and a bomber when he encountered thirty-six French and Spanish vessels. The combined fleet was sailing for the port when they noticed Collingwood's small force and sent sixteen ships after him. In a display of skillful seamanship, the British squadron managed to outmaneuver and elude the pursuing enemies as it fled towards the Straits of Gibraltar. After the French and Spanish gave up the chase, Collingwood reversed and resumed his station of Cadiz, sending one of his ships out onto the horizon to make fake signals, as if to a larger force of British ships so that the combined fleets would be intimidated into remaining in port.[79]

When news of Collingwood's encounter spread, Nelson was immediately dispatched to provide his assistance. While on route, Nelson wrote to Collingwood asking that "(…) no salute may take place, but also that no colours be hoisted: for it is as well not to proclaim to the enemy every ship which may join the fleet."[80] Repeating Howe's ideas, Nelson sent another letter to Collingwood on October 10 that read "(…) if the weather is fine (…) and we are in sight, [the combined fleet] will never move; and should it turn bad, we may be forced into the Mediterranean, and thus leave them at liberty to go to the westward (…)"[81] He understood that the French and Spanish needed to be lured out of Cadiz as quickly as possible, and that the most effective way to do so was to mask the numbers of the growing British squadron.

The combined fleet could not remain in port at Cadiz for long. Napoleon had prepared Brest, Rochefort, and Ferrol with enough stores for a force of its size, but not Cadiz. The combined fleet had only arrived there after Sir Robert Calder had forced it south. Collingwood was aware of this, and on October 6 wrote to Nelson that the combined fleet had become completely isolated from any supplies out of France.[82] It was under these circumstances that the fresh British squadron tempted the combined fleet with an avenue to escape, knowing that they were desperate and could be intercepted. The Battle of Trafalgar occurred because the British had actively sought to bring the enemy out from Cadiz's harbour, rather than containing it through blockading methods.

The destruction of the combined fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar altered Napoleon's plans for Great Britain, and thus had significant strategic consequences for the Royal Navy. The emperor's primary focus following the battle was no longer invasion, but rather to defeat Great Britain by ruining its commerce with the Continental System.[83] Napoleon's Berlin Decree of November 21, 1806, had placed all the British islands under blockade, and had forbade British vessels from entering French ports. He followed this order up on December 17, 1807, with the Milan Decree, which declared any ships that submitted to searches by the Royal Navy to be denationalized.[84]

Napoleon had enacted his Decrees without having any fleets capable of enforcing them. Great Britain, by contrast, had issued Orders in Council on May 16, 1806, and November 11, 1807, which effectively ended France's maritime trade. The first Order in Council had declared the entire European coast from Brest to the Elbe under blockade, while the three issued on November 11 did the same to every port that belonged to a nation or colony hostile to Great Britain. The Royal Navy was now charged with maintaining a paper blockade; it did not have the resources to watch every port as closely as had been required prior to the Battle of Trafalgar, but its unquestioned dominance of the seas meant that it did not have to. The Royal Navy was able to employ its fleets in such a manner as to make the approaches to the European continent sufficiently dangerous as to dismay any merchant vessels from attempting to defy their blockade. They "(…) controlled the approaches from the Atlantic to all the northern continental ports; and at Gibraltar those to the Mediterranean."[85] The Royal Navy's blockade system was now its greatest asset, acting as a deterrent which facilitated the growth of Great Britain's commerce and industrial power while simultaneously draining France of its resources and straining Napoleon's ties with his continental allies.[86]

From the years 1793 to 1805, the Royal

Navy had attempted to contain enemy naval forces through an onerous blockade system which required its ships to maintain a constant presence outside hostile ports. This approach to naval warfare was tactically inefficient because it allowed enemy fleets to maintain fleets in being, it did not allow the Royal Navy to take advantage of its superior fighting forces and it placed an unnecessary strain on British naval personnel. A more aggressive system of baiting its enemies into open-water battles would have allowed the Royal Navy to exercise its advantages and could have eliminated the threat that the French and Spanish fleets posed to Great Britain.

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[1]Maine, R. (1957) *Trafalgar: Napoleon's Naval Waterloo*. C. Scribner's Sons. Pg 254-258.

[2]Barrow, J. (1838) *The life of Richard, earl Howe, K. -G., admiral of the fleet, and general of marines*. J. Murray. Pg 216, 218-219.

[3]Bennet, G. (1977) *The Battle of Trafalgar*. Batsford. Pg 30.

[4]*Ibid.* Pg 23, 26.

[5]The term 'man-of-war' was used to describe all ships larger than frigates during the age of sail because of the line ahead formation that they traditionally employed in battle. 'Sail-of-the-line' and 'line-of-battle ships' were two other monikers that were used interchangeably to describe these vessels.

[6]Mahan, A. (1898) *The influence of seapower upon the French revolution and empire, 1793-1812*. Little, Brown & Co. Pg 194.

[7]Bennet, G. Pg 48.

[8]*Ibid.* Pg 48.

[9]Osborne, E. (2004) *Britain's economic blockade of Germany, 1914-1919*. Taylor & Francis. Pg 83-84

[10]Barrow, J. Pg 217-218.

[11]*Ibid.* Pg 218.

[12]*Ibid.* Pg 233-234.

[13]Port St. Helens is located in the south of England.

[14]Barrow, J. Pg 230-232.

[15]To "strike a flag" means to surrender in naval terms. The phrase is taken literally from the act of removing the national flag from its place atop a mast.

[16]The term 'van' refers to the leading ships in a fleet.

To 'haul wind' in nautical terms means to turn the front of the ship towards the point that the wind is blowing from. The French fleet performed this maneuver in order to expose their broadsides to the comparably-vulnerable fronts of the British ships.

[17]Barrow, J. Pg 230-232.

[18]*Ibid.* Pg 233-234.

[19]Collingwood, C., Collingwood, G. (1829) *A selection from the public and private correspondence of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood: interspersed with memoirs of his life*. G. & C. & H. Carvill. Pg 25;

The names of ships often remained unchanged after they were captured, which is why many of the Royal Navy's vessels from the period in question had French or Spanish names.

[20]Collingwood, C. Pg 3.

[21]To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Excellent*, off Toulon, May 11, 1796 in *Ibid.* Pg 38.

[22]To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Excellent*, Still off Toulon, September 25 1796 in *Ibid.* Pg 42-44;

To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Excellent*, Gibraltar, December 5, 1796 in *Ibid.* Pg 44-45.

[23]Carthagena can also be spelled Cartagena. Both refer to the same city in Spain.

[24]To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Excellent*, off Cadiz, January 26, 1798 in Collingwood, C. Pg 84-87.

[25]To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Excellent*, off Cadiz, January 26, 1798 in *Ibid.* Pg 85-88.

[26]To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Triumph*, off Mahon, July 11, 1799 in *Ibid.* Pg. 104.

[27]*Triumph*, Torbay, August 18, 1799 in *Ibid.* Pg. 105.

[28]White, J. (1806) *Memoirs of the Professional Life of the late Most Noble Lord Horatio Nelson*. J. Cundee. Pg 106-120, 174-176.

[29]*Ibid.* Pg 78.

[30]Clarke, J., M'Arthur, J. (1810) *The life of Admiral Lord Nelson, K. B. from his lordships manuscripts*. Caldell and Davies. Pg 451-452.

[31]*Ibid.* Pg 456.

[32]*Ibid.* Pg 457.

[33]White, J. (1806) *Memoirs of the Professional Life of the late Most Noble Lord Horatio Nelson*. J. Cundee. Pg 78-82.

[34]*Ibid.* Pg 83-85.

[35]*Ibid.* Pg 88-92.

[36]*Ibid.* Pg 93-94.

[37]*Ibid.* Pg 100-104.

[38]*Ibid.* Pg 105.

[39]*Ibid.* Pg 106-120.

[40]*Ibid*. Pg 128.

[41]*Ibid*. Pg 96.

[42]*Ibid*. Pg 173.

[43]*Ibid*. Pg 169.

[44]*Ibid*. Pg 174.

[45]Clarke, J. Pg 606.

[46]Bennet, G. Pg 138.

'The Nelson touch' initially referred to Lord Nelson's tactics for the Battle of Trafalgar, but later more generally referred to his particular leadership style.

[47]Nelson had moved from his own ship, the *St. George*, to the smaller *Elephant* for the battle so that he could maneuver in the narrow Danish waters.

[48]Clarke, J. Pg 606-608.

[49]White, J. Pg 174-176.

[50]Captain Puget to Cornwallis, *Foudroyant* Cawsand Bay, June 23, 1804 in Leyland, J. (1902) *Dispatches and letters relating to the blockade of Brest, 1803-1805*. Navy Records Society. Pg 5-6;

Ibid. Pg 3-4.

[51]*Ibid*. Pg 4.

[52]*Ibid*. Pg 5-6

[53]*Ibid.* Pg 2-8;

Lord Melville to Cornwallis, Admiralty, July 10, 1804 in *Ibid.* Pg 8-9;

Lord Melville to Cornwallis, Wimbledon, August 9, 1804 in *Ibid.* Pg 9-10;

Memorandum by Captain Brisbane, *Glory*, August 16 1804, in *Ibid.* Pg 10-11;

Cornwallis to Lord Melville, *Glory*, off St. Helen's, August 17, 1804 in *Ibid.* Pg 11-12.

[54]*Ibid.* Pg 12;

Lord Melville to Cornwallis, Wimbledon, August 26, 1804 in *Ibid.* Pg 13-14;

Lord Melville to Cornwallis, Admiralty, September 5, 1804 in *Ibid.* Pg 14-15;

Admiral Young to Cornwallis, Plymouth Dock, September 7, 1804 in *Ibid.* Pg 21.

[55]Cornwallis to the lieutenants of the *Rifleman*, *Pelter*, *Biter*, *Thrasher*, *Phosphorus*, By the Hon. William Cornwallis, Admiral of the White &c. in *Ibid.* Pg 26;

Cornwallis to Lieutenant Higginson (*Happy Return*) in *Ibid*. Pg 27.

[56]Cornwallis to Lord Melville, 16 October 1804 in *Ibid*. Pg 29.

[57]Barrow, J. Pg 218-219.

[58]Brenton, E. (1838) *Life and correspondence of John, earl of St. Vincent*. H. Colburn. Pg 206-207.

[59]An Officer of His Majesty's Navy (1804) *An answer to Mr. Pitt's attack upon Earl St. Vincent, and the Admiralty, in his motion for an enquiry into the state of the naval defence of the Country, on 15th of March, 1804*. H. Ebers. Pg 2.

[60]*Ibid*. Pg 3-6.

[61]Mahan, A. Pg 111-115.

[62]An Officer of His Majesty's Navy. Pg 6.

[63]*Ibid*. Pg 6.

[64]Colville, Q., Davey, J. (2013) *Nelson, Navy & Nation: the Royal Navy & the British people, 1688-1815*. Conway. Pg 148

[65]Bennett, G. Pg 238.

[66]Colville, Q. Pg 148, 208, 210, 219.

[67]To W. Marsden, Esq. *Euryalus*, off Cape Trafalgar, October 22, 1805 in Collingwood, C. Pg 161-162.

[68]*Ibid*. Pg 171.

[69]*Ibid*. Pg 172.

[70]*Ibid*. Pg 175.

[71]Bennet, G. Pg 191.

[72]Beatty, W. (1825) *Authentic narrative of the death of Lord Nelson: comprising several interesting circumstances preceding, attending and subsequent to, that event*. W. Mason. Pg 25.

[73]*Ibid*. Pg 28.

[74]*Ibid*. Pg 29, 32.

[75]To W. Marsden, Esq. *Euryalus*, off Cape Trafalgar, October 22, 1805 in Collingwood, C. Pg 163-164.

[76]To J. E. Blackett, Esq. *Queen*, November 2, 1805 in *Ibid*. Pg 183-186.

[77]Rodstock, W. (1806) *The British flag triumphant! or, the wooden walls of old England: being copies of the London gazettes, containing the accounts of the great victories and gallant exploits of the British fleets, during the last and present war; together with correct lists of the admirals and captains in the several engagements: to which is prefixed, an address to the officers, seamen, and marines, of His Majesty's fleets*. Rivington. Pg 3-4.

[78]See pages 2 and 3.

[79]To Mrs. Collingwood, *Dreadnought*, off Cadiz, August 21, 1805 in Collingwood, C. Pg 148-149.

[80]From Lord Nelson, *Victory*, September 25, 1805 in *Ibid*. Pg 153.

[81]From Lord Nelson, *Victory*, October 10, 1805 in *Ibid*. Pg 157.

[82]To Lord Nelson, October 6, 1805 in *Ibid*. Pg 155.

[83]Mahan, A. Pg 184-185, 197.

[84]*Ibid.* Pg 272, 290. To be denationalized was the naval equivalent of being declared an outlaw.

[85]Mahan, A. Pg 272, 283-288.

[86]Maine, R. Pg 254-258