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Young Nelsons:

Boy Sailors During the Napoleonic Wars

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Trafalgar

William Pitt's plans to trick, tease, taunt, tempt Napoleon had finally paid off. The game of cat and mouse that had begun the day Nelson sailed from Portsmouth aboard his flagship Victory in 1803 finally reached its climax on 21 October 1805 off the coast of Spain, so close to Cadiz that people would have been able to watch and listen as the Great Battle raged on the horizon.

In the early morning on that day, the Combined Fleet sailed remorselessly towards Nelson's killing seas: now the massacre could begin. Aboard each one of the 27 ships-of-the-line in the British fleet, officers and men, young gentlemen and boys waited. Among Victory's complement of 850 men, there was one ten-year-old boy, four aged 12 and six aged 13.³⁶ Rallying his midshipmen ahead of the battle, Nelson gave the following speech: 'Tomorrow, I will do that which will give you young gentlemen something to talk and think about for the rest of your lives. But I shall not live to know about it myself.'³⁷

Ignorant these youngsters may have been of the mighty battle that Pitt, the Admiralty and Nelson envisioned for them, but one thing they were sure of was that Nelson would deliver success. Thomas Aikenhead, a Midshipman on the Royal Sovereign, wrote his last ever letter four hours before the battle. He sums up the mood bent on sacrifice:

We have just piped to breakfast; thirty-five sail, besides smaller vessels, are now on our beam, about three miles off. Should I, my dear parents, fall in defence of my King, let that thought console you. I feel not the least dread on my spirits. Oh my parents, sisters, brothers, dear grandfather, grandmother, and aunt, believe me ever your! Accept, perhaps for the last time, your brother's love; be assured I feel for my friends, should I die in this glorious action – glorious no doubt it will be. Every British heart pants for glory. Our old Admiral [Admiral Collingwood] is quite young

with the thoughts of it. If I survive, nothing will give me greater pleasure than embracing my dearest relations. Do not, in case I fall, grieve – it will be to no purpose. Many brave fellows will no doubt fall with me on both sides.³⁸

With the superior training of the men, their more rapid rate of fire, and the fighting readiness of every officer, seaman and boy in the British fleet, the outcome of the battle would never be in doubt, especially when heading towards the British were two allies reluctantly fighting side by side, each commanded by an officer corps with an equally sclerotic tactical mindset. After a long history of defeats at the hands of the British Navy, the French had asked time and again why they kept losing and had concluded that it was the British strategy of ‘killing as many as possible of the enemy, rather than of injuring their ships’.³⁹ This was Nelson’s objective at Trafalgar; he would not be bringing any new strategy to the battle. It would be the ruthless way he executed the strategy and the specific tactics that he employed in setting up his killing seas that was novel. Villeneuve even correctly foretold the tactics Nelson would adopt, yet seemed powerless, paralysed, to do anything to prevent them.

Formed up in one long line of battle as was their convention, the French and Spanish offered themselves up as easy prey for the British fleet approaching at right angles and dividing into two parallel columns ready to break the enemy line at its weakest points. Nelson in Victory commanded one division, Admiral Collingwood in Royal Sovereign was at the head of the other. Sketches showing the opposing battle formation minutes before impact conjure an air of order and calm, so precise, so simple, so perfect was the linear geometry of the competing battle plans. As if mesmerized by the moment, Captain Codrington on the Orion could only wonder later in awe that ‘I suppose no man ever before saw a sight of such beauty’.⁴⁰ Within minutes all that would change. The first shots of the Great Battle were unleashed on the Royal Sovereign by the Fougueux at midday. ‘Move’ the hour-glass forward to 1.15pm to the time when the master of the Mars, Thomas Cook, recorded that ‘Captain Duff was killed’,⁴¹ and all ‘beauty’ had disappeared. Instead, all was exactly as Nelson had ordered it: ‘pell-mell’ chaos with, for instance, ‘the poop and quarter-deck [of the Mars] almost left destitute, the carnage was so great’.⁴² No more ‘wooden walls’ here. Only the sickening, bludgeoning thud of three great empires – Spain, France and Britain – colliding cataclysmically.

The Battle of Trafalgar would be like no other battle of the Wars. When all hyperbole was stripped away, the Battle of the Glorious First of June had been a timid, honourable draw, the Battle of Cape St Vincent an opportunistic flash in the pan signifying little beyond a much-needed shot in the arm for British morale, and the Battle of the Nile, in many ways the most overwhelming of Nelson’s victories, as good as over before it started. By contrast, in those fateful morning hours of 21 October 1805, as the British fleet slowly descended on its prey desperately skirting the Spanish coast past Cape Trafalgar, the stench of impending massacre stalked the air and with it, for each man and boy in the fleet, the simple lottery of ‘Death or Glory’,⁴³ as was etched on the cannons of the Bellerophon. But for Nelson there was no such choice. Ahead of the Battle of Cape St Vincent, his cry had been ‘Westminster Abbey! or glorious victory’.⁴⁴ Ahead of the Battle of the Nile, his last letter to Fanny had said, ‘Glory is my object and that alone.’⁴⁵ Come the Great Battle,

his war cry would be Westminster Abbey and glorious victory: death and glory were to become one.

Urged in the heat of the battle 'not to appear so conspicuously, in full uniform, to the mark of the topmen of the enemy',⁴⁶ Nelson shot back: 'No... Whatever may be the consequence, the insignia of the honours I now wear I gained by the exertion of British seamen, under my command in various parts of the world; and in the hour of danger, I am proud to show them and the enemies of England, I will never part with them; if it please God I am to fall, I will expire with these trophies entwined round my heart.'⁴⁷

Would that it were he alone meeting his apotheosis! But on his remorseless funeral march to the great doors of Westminster Abbey, this mighty sea-horseman of the apocalypse would draw many into his vortex of death and destruction, among them the midshipmen and fresh-faced young volunteers serving as his aides-de-camp on the quarterdeck of Victory, from where they sent signals, ran messages and brought news, as when, minutes before being felled by a French sharpshooter, Nelson 'observed the act of throwing his Secretary over board, and said, as if doubtful, to a Midshipman who was near him, "Was that Scott?" The Midshipman replied, he believed it was. He exclaimed, "Poor fellow!"'⁴⁸ After Nelson was fatally wounded and lying on the middle-deck, still he issued orders to his aides-de-camp, as when 'his Lordship observed that the tiller-ropes were not yet replaced, and desired one of the Midshipmen stationed there to go upon the quarter-deck and remind Captain Hardy of that circumstance'.⁴⁹ Many midshipmen would not only have been trained in swordsmanship, but would have learnt how to fire a pistol or musket, so that when Nelson was down in the cockpit, slowly dying of his wounds, 'the Frenchman by whose hand this matchless hero fell, was soon afterwards shot by Mr Pollard, Midshipman of the Victory, and was seen to fall out of the mizzen-top'.⁵⁰

Down in the Victory's cockpit, with the wounded and dying waiting in line for treatment, 'the Surgeon, finding it impossible to render his Lordship any further assistance, left him to attend Lieutenant Bligh, Messrs Smith and Westphall, Midshipmen, and some seamen recently wounded'.⁵¹ Robert Smith would die from his wounds, as would another midshipman on the Victory, Alexander Palmer. George Westphall survived along with two other midshipmen, William Rivers and Richard Bulkeley, both wounded, the latter evidently not seriously enough to prevent him cutting off the 'lock of hair' from Nelson's head. Among boys from Victory's lower-decks, three volunteers, third class, died: Stephen Sabine, George Welch and Collin Turner; and John Saunders was wounded. Elsewhere in the British fleet, casualties among midshipmen ran high. In all, 13 midshipmen died in the British fleet and a further 45 were wounded, among whom were some volunteers, first class.

Despite being only the fifth ship in the lee division, the Bellerophon soon sought out the heat of action, locking on to the French 74-gun L'Aigle and trading murderous musket and cannon shot at close quarters until, as John Franklin later described, 'our people took the quoins out and elevated their guns, so as to tear her decks and sides to pieces: when she got clear of us, she did not return a single shot whilst we raked her, her starboard quarter was entirely beaten in, and, as we afterwards learnt, four

hundred men hors de combat, so that she was an easy conquest for the Defiance, a fresh ship...'.52 John survived the battle unscathed, dodging the bullets of the French sharpshooter high in the rigging of the L'Aigle, whose 'features he vowed he would never forget so long as he lived'.53 as he sprinted along the upper deck with a message. However, other midshipmen on board the Bellerophon were not so lucky, William Jewell, James Stone, Thomas Bant and George Pearson all being wounded. Aboard the Mars, the carnage was exceptional. On the morning of the battle, Worthy Duff had received 'the signal ... to lead the lee division of our fleet and to break the enemy's line'.54 However, because it 'sailed ill ... the Mars, notwithstanding every exertion, was passed by the Royal Sovereign ... then the Belleisle also shot a-head, and they were in action a few minutes before the Mars: each ship breaking through a different part of the enemy's line'.55

Minutes before entering the battle, Worthy Duff wrote telling his wife that 'I have just time to tell you we are going into action with the combined fleet. I hope and trust in God that we shall all behave as becomes us, and that I may yet have the happiness of taking my beloved wife and children in my arms. Norwich is quite well, and happy. I have however ordered him off the quarter-deck'.56 Very solicitous, but where to send their 13-year-old son to safety on a warship about to go into battle? Surely not down to the cockpit where the 'medical tribe' would soon start the work of Aesculapius?

Where to then? Why not the relative safety of the captain's cabin, which is where Captain Duckworth had quartered William Parker and the other young gentlemen too young to fight during the Battle of the Glorious First of June? Doubtless that is where Worthy Duff intended to send his son, but that is not where Norwich ended up. Instead: 'Captain Duff's son, and three other boys who went out with him, were stationed on the lower-deck during the action, where, their schoolmaster writes, they behaved like Young Nelsons'.57

On his way down to the lower gun deck, Norwich would have passed other 'young Nelsons', Royal Marine boys William Gill, John Hall and Francis Parish, whose task at battle stations would have been to keep the gangways clear of dead bodies and report any shirkers. Once down on the lower-deck, Norwich would have fought alongside the gun crews, teaming up with more young Nelsons: boys such as Peter Black and Charles Niles, volunteers second class, and William Crump and John Jarvis, volunteers third class, busy as powder monkeys fetching and carrying supplies for the gun crews.

Worthy Duff had made the right decision when he ordered Norwich off the quarterdeck, otherwise, as William Hennah, lieutenant on Mars, later explained in a letter home, the youngster would have been caught up in the ensuing carnage when 'the Quarter-Deck suffered more than any other part of the Ship and I must consider myself as a lucky man in having escaped without the smallest injury'.58 Not so lucky was:

Captain Duff [who] walked about with steady fortitude and said, 'My God, what shall we do, here is a Spanish three-decker raking us ahead, a French one under the stern.' In few minutes our poop was totally cleared, the quater deck and forcastle [sic]

nearly the same, only the Boatswain and myself and three men left alive. It was then the gallant Captain fell. I saw him fall. His head and neck were entirely off his body, when the men heard it, they held his body up and gave three cheers to show they were not discouraged, and then returned to their guns.⁵⁹

In all, according to young Banffshire midshipman T. Robinson, the Mars 'had an hundred and ten men killed and wounded, four midshipmen and Captain of Marines'.⁶⁰

Down on the lower-deck, Norwich was spared death or injury, but not the pain he must later bear writing to 'My Dear Mamma' after the Great Battle, to inform her that:

...you cannot possibly imagine how unwilling I am to begin this melancholy letter. However, as you must unavoidably hear the fate of dear Papa, I write you these few lines to request you to bear it as patiently as you can. He died like a Hero, having gallantly led his ship into action, and his memory will ever be dear to his King, his Country, and his Friends. It was about fifteen minutes past twelve in the afternoon of the 21st of October, when the engagement began, and it was not finished till five. Many a brave Hero sacrificed his life upon that occasion to his King and his Country.⁶¹

The Great Battle over, the dead needed to be 'buried'. The log of the Mars for 22 October read: 'At 5.30, committed the body of Captain Duff to the deep.'⁶²

Elsewhere round the victorious fleet, similar ceremonies were underway. Surely now the victors could at last enjoy the spoils of war, the prize money that it was every sailor's right to receive in victory. However the survivors of Trafalgar, be they the defeated French and Spanish or the victorious British, had one more battle to fight. The log of the Mars for 22 October had already sounded the grim warning when it recorded the order to 'set storm staysails'.⁶³ Later that same day Thomas Cook, the ship's master, recorded a further entry in the log of the Mars: 'At 12, strong winds and heavy rain.'⁶⁴

In one final apocalyptic twist of fate, a mighty storm had descended on the wreckage of the fleets of three great empires, wreaking more damage than even the Great Battle had done. During that storm, the gods of war surrendered to the gods of the firmament, completing the work of 'annihilation that the Country wants', which Nelson had started but, now dead, could not finish. The victorious British fleet, each ship fighting its own battle for survival, could only watch helplessly as, one by one, 15 French and Spanish prize-ships sank, ran aground or were scuttled in the storm. Britain's sailors, some of whom had waited for years for their share of the spoils of war, would have to wait a little longer.

Notes:

36 Hibbert, Christopher, Nelson, A Personal History, London (1994), p.325

37 Kennedy, Ludovic, Nelson's Band of Brothers, London (1951), p.314

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- 38 NC, Vol. XV, p.119
 - 39 NC, Vol. IV, p.145
 - 40 Warwick, Peter, *Voices from the Battle of Trafalgar*, Newton Abbot (2005), p.141
 - 41 Jackson, T. Sturges, ed., *Logs of the Great Sea Fights 1794–1805*, NRS, Vol. 16 (1899), p.246
 - 42 Ibid.
 - 43 NC, Vol. XVII, p.361
 - 44 Naish, George P. B., ed., *Nelson's Letters to his Wife and other Documents 1785–1831*, NRS, Vol. 100 (1958), p.276
 - 45 Ibid., p.398
 - 46 NC, Vol. XV, p.14
 - 47 Ibid.
 - 48 Ibid, p.38
 - 49 NC, Vol. XVII, p.193
 - 50 NC, Vol. XIV, p.485
 - 51 NC, Vol. XVII, p.196
 - 52 Warwick, p.185
 - 53 Ibid., p.184
 - 54 NC, Vol. XV, p.271
 - 55 Ibid.
 - 56 Ibid., p.293
 - 57 Ibid.
 - 58 AGC/H/18
 - 59 Tayler, Alistair & Henrietta, eds., *Book of the Duffs Vol. II*, Edinburgh (1914), p.263
 - 60 Ibid.
 - 61 NC, Vol. XV, p.293
 - 62 Jackson, p.247
 - 63 Ibid.
 - 64 Ibid.