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The Bicentennial Of Nelson's Victory at Trafalgar

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"England expects that every man will do his duty." — Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson's call to battle, October 21, 1805.

Today marks the bicentennial of Britain's victory over the combined fleets of France and Spain at the Battle of Trafalgar. History often hinges on single days and individual battles when the balance of power is at stake.

John Keegan, Britain's premier military historian, puts the battle in perspective: *Only by a complete victory could he make England safe from Napoleon, who had filled every estuary and port on the Channel coast with invasion barges to carry his army, camped on the cliffs outside Boulogne, to England.*

Little as he knew of naval warfare, Napoleon did recognise that he could not risk the Grand Army at sea while the Royal Navy was still intact and near at hand.

He had therefore charged his admiral Villeneuve to draw off the British squadrons which blockaded his fleet in its harbours. He rightly doubted that he could successfully challenge the British to action. The unfortunate Villeneuve found himself caught between two fires, the raging impatience of the Emperor and the massed guns of the Royal Navy.

He sought a middle way out. On March 30 he sailed from Toulon for the West Indies, hoping to draw the British Mediterranean fleet behind him, lose it somewhere across the Atlantic and get back into European waters, free to mount an offensive against whatever British ship remained to menace the invasion barges.

Villeneuve got to the West Indies but on arrival found Nelson attached as firmly to his tail as if he had been dragged behind. He could not break the attachment when he turned for home. Arriving in Spanish waters in August, he found Nelson still up with him, where he remained as summer turned to autumn. Villeneuve also found carping letters from Napoleon, accusing him of fearing to fight.

In the end Villeneuve decided to fight, but wrote to the French navy minister that he did not know what to do. Nelson knew exactly what to do. He had worked out a method of fighting a large scale naval battle and now fretted to put it into effect.

More: By the morning of Oct 21, his captains knew exactly what they had to do. They were assured of victory, as long as the Combined Fleet left port to accept battle. Villeneuve decided to do so, though with a heavy heart; he feared defeat but he feared even more Napoleon's disfavour if he did not fight.

Only 16 of the 28 enemy ships survived. None of the 23 British ships was lost. Victory (Nelson's flag ship) of course survives to this day. And if Britain has such a thing as a national shrine she is it.

At Trafalgar under Nelson's command, she and her sisters assured that Britain would not be invaded and that Napoleon would have to look elsewhere for a victory.

He kept on trying until 1815 when, at Waterloo, he was defeated on his own element, on land.

HAIL BRITANNIA LINKS: John Keegan, "200 Years Since Nelson Did His Duty," *The Telegraph* [London];

“Britain Marks Battle of Trafalgar,” BBC News; “A Beacon in British History,” *The Boston Globe*; “When Britannia Ruled the Waves,” *International Herald Tribune*. Jay Tolson, “The Battle that Changed the World,” *US News and World Report*, October 24, 2005.

See also Web sources at Admiral Lord Nelson and His Navy; Historic UK, BBC History, Royal Navy, Life Aboard HMS Victory.

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