

As Lt. Paul Nicolas stood on the forward edge of the poop deck of H.M.S. *Belleisle*, a 74-gun ship of the line, the only thing he could think of was lying down. It wasn't that he was tired. But he was only 16 and new to the ship. Now he was about to get his first taste of battle. It was shortly after midday on October 21, 1805, near Cádiz in southern Spain. As *Belleisle* plowed slowly toward the enemy, Nicolas could see a crescent-shaped line of 33 French and Spanish ships stretching for miles along the coast from Cape Roche in the north to Cape Trafalgar in the south.

Belleisle's crew was in boisterous spirits. They'd been waiting more than two months to have a go at Johnny Crapaud, as they called the French. The gunners had chalked "Victory or Death" on their cannon. Earlier that morning the ship's band had played

patriotic tunes like "Hearts of Oak" and "Britons, Strike Home!"

William Hargood, *Belleisle*'s captain, ordered the crew to lie down as the first incoming shots tore through the rigging. A young recruit near Nicolas was decapitated by a cannonball. Blood and body parts spattered the deck. Nicolas would have given his eyeteeth to lie down, but he was second in charge of a detachment of marines, and as an officer he had to stay on his feet. So he moved next to John Owen, a junior lieutenant, who was slightly older. Years later, Nicolas would write that Owen's spirit "cheered me on to act the part it became me."

It also cheered him that across the water he

A 19th-century painting captures the havoc of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805, when 27 British ships defeated Napoleon's Combined Fleet of 33 French and Spanish vessels, ending France's bid to rule the seas. Nearly 8,000 men were killed or wounded.

could see the towering outline of H.M.S. *Victory*, the 100-gun flagship of the British fleet, commanded by Admiral Lord Nelson. Nicolas had never met Nelson. But like everyone in the Royal Navy, he knew the stories—how Nelson had taken a Spanish ship, then used it to board and capture a second one; how he had lost his arm leading a nighttime raid on Tenerife; how he had

annihilated the French fleet at Aboukir Bay seven years earlier. With Nelson in command the outcome was certain. Earlier that morning Nelson had run signal flags up *Victory's* mast spelling out the words "England expects that every man will do his duty." The whole fleet had cheered.

But it was going to be a bloody fight. Not like the textbooks, where the fleets lined up side by side and bludgeoned it out with broadsides. Nelson wanted what he called a "pell-mell battle." He had split the fleet of 27 British ships of the line into two columns and ordered them to sail straight at the enemy line, cutting it in two places, like a pack of wolves running at a herd of deer.

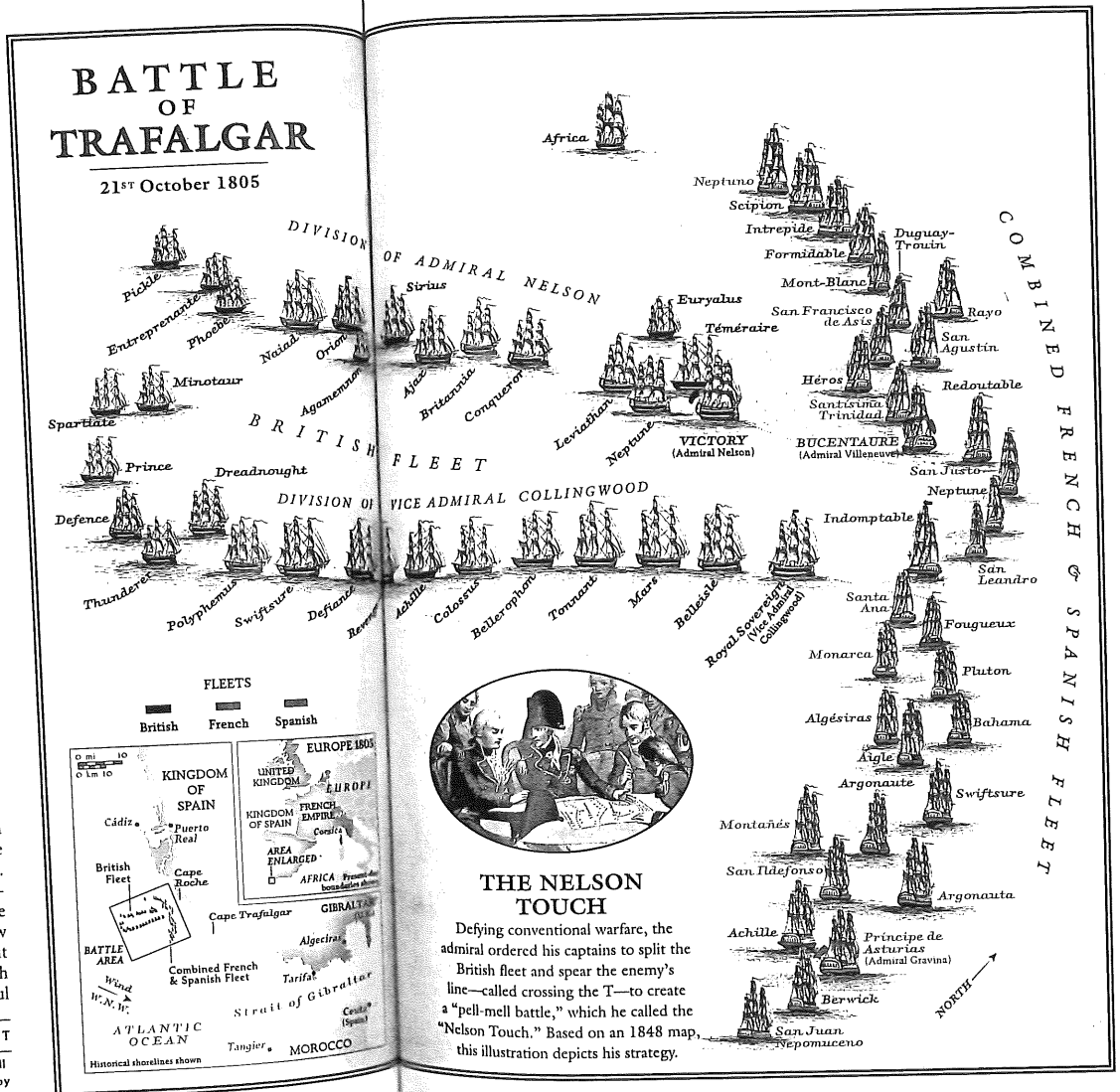
Following *Royal Sovereign*, *Belleisle* was the second ship in the lee squadron, which was commanded by Cuthbert Collingwood, or Old Cuddie as the men called him behind his back. He was a reserved, bookish man who longed to be back home in his Northumberland garden planting cabbages and potatoes and who preferred the company of his dog, Bounce, to most men. Bounce went everywhere with him, sleeping beside his cot or trotting beside him on the quarterdeck. Earlier that morning, Collingwood's servant, John Smith, had taken Bounce down to the hold and tied him up for safekeeping.

Nelson's plan had one potentially fatal flaw. By sailing head-on at the enemy fleet, he would be doing something that every naval manual warned against: He would be crossing the T. For the last 20 minutes of the approach, his ships would be in range of the enemy's broadsides. With a strong wind behind them, that time might be reduced to ten minutes, but the wind had died. *Belleisle* was moving at an agonizing pace.

Smoke erupted from the enemy guns, followed by a roar like thunder as several ships opened fire on *Belleisle* at once. Spars came crashing down. Men screamed. Seeing the carnage, 1st Lt. Ebenezer Geale suggested to Captain Hargood that he swing round and fire a broadside, if only to throw up a smoke screen. Hargood's reply rang out across the deck. "We are ordered to go through the line, and go through she shall, by God!" Paul Nicolas held his breath and tried not to think about lying down.

Britain had been at war with France off and

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ORIGINAL MAP BY A. K. JOHNSTON, ATLAS OF AFRICA'S HISTORY OF EUROPE 1848
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Nelson's naked body was covered with sailcloth. With each heartbeat, blood gushed into his lungs. He had no sensation in his lower body. He called for a fan. He asked for lemonade.

on since 1793. There was a brief peace in 1802, but a year later hostilities flared again. The Napoleonic Wars, as they became known, were a new kind of conflict: a war of ideology prosecuted in a spirit of deep animosity. For Nelson, Napoleon represented what Joseph Stalin—or Osama bin Laden—would mean to our age. Nelson passionately believed he had been called by his country, and by God, to defend England from tyranny.

By the summer of 1805, Napoleon had massed 90,000 troops in Boulogne for an invasion across the English Channel. But he had yet to assemble the naval power to protect his troops during a crossing. "England was in the middle of a total war for national survival," says Andrew Lambert, a professor of naval history at King's College London. "More taxes were raised per capita in the war against Napoleon than in the war against Hitler. For Nelson, the French were the enemy, and they had to be annihilated."

Anihilate was one of Nelson's favorite words. "It is annihilation that the country wants, not merely a splendid victory," he told his officers before the Battle of Trafalgar. The word was almost certainly on his lips as he paced the quarterdeck of *Victory* that morning, with his closest friend, the ship's captain, Thomas Masterman Hardy. They made a curious pair. Hardy was six feet four, a burly Dorset man of farming stock. Nelson was five feet six, narrow-shouldered and built like a ballet dancer.

At the age of 47, Nelson was the most famous British naval commander since Sir Francis Drake. He had won three major battles and fought 50 other engagements, more than any admiral in the history of the Royal Navy. His highly publicized—and adulterous—love affair with Emma Hamilton, a British diplomat's wife Nelson had

*Glorified in art, Nelson wore the stars of knighthood awarded for his many naval victories. His amputated right arm and a sightless eye were war wounds that earned him the respect of the ranks. Nelson spent his last agonizing hours belowdecks on *Victory* (right) before paying the ultimate price. Says historian Andrew Lambert, that was the moment "when Nelson ceased to be a living hero and became a god."*



met in Naples, only added to his star wattage. "Nelson was the first great modern hero," says Tom Pocock, a Nelson biographer and former war correspondent. "Everyone knew the stories of his battles, and the story of Emma. He had toured Britain a lot. There were pictures of him everywhere. He was the first celebrity of the modern kind. He was everyman and superman."

He bore little resemblance to the apple-cheeked dandy of his official portraits. At sea since he was 12, Nelson had spent only two of the past dozen years on land. His face was weather-beaten, his teeth rotten, and his body scarred and mangled. It was common for sailors or gunners to lose limbs, be shot or burned. It was rare among admirals. Nelson led from the front, putting his own life on the line while asking others to do the same.

Nelson's wounds were the true badges of his courage, more than the four orders of knighthood and two gold medals that glittered on his coat on ceremonial occasions. In 1794, at the siege of Calvi on the island of Corsica, a cannonball smashed into the parapet next to him, driving sand and gravel into his right eye. (Contrary to popular portrayals, Nelson never wore an eye



patch.) To shade his remaining good eye from the glare of the sea, he had a green felt visor made for him, which stuck out from under his cocked hat like the bill of a baseball cap. Nelson's right arm was amputated six inches above the elbow after he was hit by a musket ball while leading a special-forces-type operation at Tenerife. Other ailments included concussion, rheumatic fever, scurvy, malaria, probably a hernia, possibly tuberculosis.

Nelson made light of his wounds—"She fell into my arm," he famously said of his first meeting with Emma Hamilton—but they made his men feel he was one of them. They also gave him what we now refer to as instant brand recognition. "He called his amputated arm his fin," explains Colin White, a naval historian at the National Maritime Museum in London. "And he used it to say: This is me, Nelson. In the Baltic, in 1801, as he was being rowed in an open boat, he was challenged by a ship from his own fleet. He threw back his cloak and said: 'I am Lord Nelson, and here is my fin.'"

There were 820 men on board *Victory*, including 14 commissioned officers, 70 petty officers, and 665 seamen and marines, 31 of whom were

boys. One of the first shots to hit the ship cut Nelson's personal secretary, John Scott, in half. There was no time for a proper burial, so his body was simply thrown overboard. Moments later a double-headed bar shot, a foot-long length of iron shaped like a dumbbell mowed down a party of marines, killing eight and wounding dozens more. Another shot passed between Nelson and Hardy and slammed into a wooden brace. A splinter ripped off the buckle on Hardy's shoe, bruising his foot. The two men looked anxiously at each other. Then Nelson smiled. "This is too warm work, Hardy, to last long," he said.

Beneath the humor was real fear. "He expected the French to be on the run," White says. "He didn't expect them to stand and fight. And he knew the danger of his plan of attack: If the French gunners had been any good, they would have shot the *Victory* to pieces."

Initially Nelson had been aiming for a gap behind the giant battleship *Santísima Trinidad*. The Spanish were reluctant allies of the French. Several captains had fought with the British a

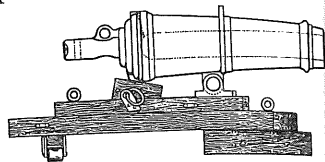
Alcalá Galiano's telescope was knocked out of his hand by a musket ball. His coxswain picked it up and was cut in half by a cannonball. Seconds later grapeshot blew off the top of Alcalá Galiano's head.

dozen years earlier against Napoleon's navy. Now they found themselves dragged into a battle for which they had little appetite because of an alliance they did not believe in, with Napoleon, a man many of them despised. They counted among their numbers men like Cosmé Damián Churruga, a Basque sea captain and navigator, who had sailed to Patagonia as a young man and now commanded the 74-gun *San Juan Nepomuceno*, and Dionisio Alcalá Galiano, one of the first Europeans to explore the Pacific Northwest, captain of *Bahama*.

But it was a Frenchman that Nelson was gunning for as he sailed toward the enemy line: Adm. Pierre Villeneuve, commander of the Combined Fleet. Seven years earlier, at the Battle of the Nile in Egypt's Aboukir Bay, Villeneuve had watched as Nelson had reduced Napoleon's navy to charred wreckage. One of Nelson's captains gave him a coffin made from the timbers of *L'Orient*, the French flagship, as a souvenir of his victory. During the trip back to England, Nelson kept it in the great cabin of *Victory*, behind the chair where he ate dinner with his officers.

In March, Villeneuve had combined his force with a Spanish fleet based at Cádiz and led them across the Atlantic as a diversion to draw Nelson away from Europe, so Napoleon's Army of England could cross the Channel. It worked. Nelson chased Villeneuve to the West Indies and back, narrowly missing him off Martinique. Back in Europe, Villeneuve headed for Brest, in Brittany, where he was to rendezvous with the rest of the French fleet. But on July 22, off Cape Finisterre, he met a British squadron. In a battle in thick fog he lost two Spanish ships. Spooked and demoralized, he fled south to Cádiz, foiling Napoleon's invasion plan.

There was a profound geopolitical logic why the defining battle of the age of sail was being fought here. Cádiz was the hinge between the



The snub-nosed carronade (above) spewed cruelty from *Victory's* deck—hundreds of bone-shattering musket balls at once. Enemy sailors called it the “devil gun.” Such a gun ravaged the decks of the French flagship *Bucentaure*. It limped back to Cádiz, where it sank in a storm. A diver from an international team of maritime archaeologists inspects an encrusted cannon from that ship.

Old World and the New. “The role Cádiz played in the larger strategic fight between the powers for control of the Atlantic was not fortuitous,” says Javier Fernández Reina, director of the Municipal Archives of Cádiz. “Nor was the fact that the battle took place here. Trafalgar was not an isolated event. It was the final act of a drama that had been playing out for nearly a decade.” Nelson was certain Villeneuve was in one of four ships clustered around *Santisima Trinidad*. At first Villeneuve didn't raise his flag. Then a giant Tricolor appeared on the 84-gun *Bucentaure*. Nelson had chased Villeneuve across the Atlantic and back. Now he had him in his sights. Shifting course away from *Santisima Trinidad*, *Victory* headed for the gap behind *Bucentaure*.

A ship of the line like *Victory* had more firepower than an entire land army. As it passed behind *Bucentaure*, it opened fire with what was the most powerful weapon in the world, a wide-mouthed, short-barreled cannon known as the carronade, after the Carron Company, in Glasgow, Scotland, where it was manufactured. *Victory* had two of the 68-pound guns on the forecastle. At

12:25 p.m. the larboard carronade, loaded with round shot and a canister of 500 musket balls, fired straight into Villeneuve's cabin windows, blowing out *Bucentaure's* stern.

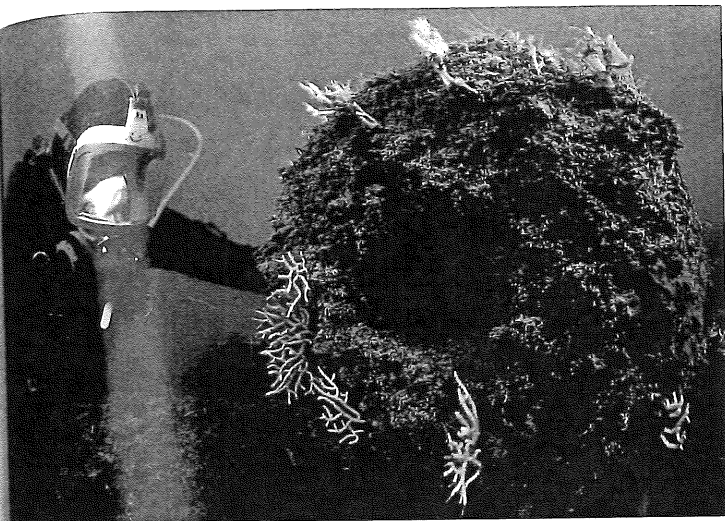
Into this gaping hole *Victory* then poured a raking broadside: 50 cannon, double-shotted, firing one after the other in a ripple action. Because *Victory* was moving so slowly, and the British gunners were so fast—it has been estimated that for every one shot from the Spanish or French the British could get off two or three—by the time Nelson had crossed *Bucentaure's* wake each gun had fired twice. At the end of that first ten-minute broadside, about 200 men, or a quarter of *Bucentaure's* crew, had been killed or disabled, and its gun decks were badly mauled.

But the cheers of *Victory's* crew were soon drowned by the crashing of timber as she rammed into one of the best manned, best run ships in the Combined Fleet: a 74-gun, two-decker called *Redoutable*. Her captain, Jean-Jacques-Étienne Lucas, was even smaller than Nelson (a *petit bonhomme*, or little man, as Remi Monaque, a French naval historian and onetime captain of a minesweeper, called this impeccably dressed,

four-foot-eight-inch-tall officer), but he was one of the few enemy captains who had thought about how he was going to fight. He knew he couldn't win a broadside duel with the better trained, better equipped British gunners. But if he could kill everyone on deck, especially the officers, he could board and take the ship.

While waiting in Cádiz, Lucas had drilled his men in the art of boarding, musketry, and grenade throwing. His deadliest weapon was a team of specially trained sharpshooters. As *Redoutable's* grappling irons locked *Victory* in place alongside her, Lucas's sharpshooters, hanging in the mizzen tops like crows, poured fire down on *Victory's* quarterdeck.

At 1:15 p.m., a little more than an hour into the battle, one of Lucas's sharpshooters fired what historian Tim Clayton calls “the most infamous musket ball in British history.” It smashed into the top of Nelson's left shoulder, traveled downward through his body, shattering two ribs, puncturing his left lung and severing his pulmonary artery before lodging in his spine. Nelson fell to the deck at the spot where his secretary, John Scott, had been killed. Their blood mingled on Nelson's breeches and coat.



Nelson's body was brought home in a barrel of brandy in the great cabin of *Victory*. His funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral was one of the grandest in British history.

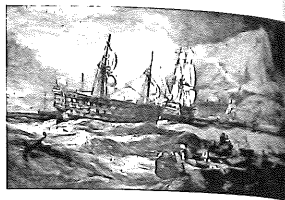
He was carried down to the cockpit, and his clothes cut away, his naked body covered with sailcloth. Then he was placed, half-sitting, half-lying, with his back propped against the timbers of *Victory*, in the only position that afforded any relief from the pain. With each heartbeat, blood gushed into his lungs. He had no sensation in his lower body. He called for a fan. He asked for lemonade. He repeatedly asked where Captain Hardy was.

As Nelson lay dying, scenes of horror and heroism were enacted in equal measure. On *Belleisle*, Paul Nicolas was helping to run out a carronade when he heard a cry: "Stand clear there! Here it comes!" Moments later *Belleisle's* mizzenmast came crashing down. *Belleisle* had been attacked by four French ships. She was unmaneuverable, but still refused to surrender. When her colors were shot away, a sailor hung a Union Jack on a spike and waved it at the French.

But the Combined Fleet was taking terrible losses. On *San Juan Nepomuceno*, pounded by seven British ships, Cosmé Damián Churrucá hemorrhaged to death after his right leg was shattered by a cannonball. On *Bahama*, Alcalá Galiano was hit in the face by a piece of splintered ship but refused to go below. His telescope was knocked out of his hand by a musket ball. His coxswain picked it up and was cut in half by a cannonball. Seconds later grapeshot from the same broadside blew off the top of Alcalá Galiano's head.

Later there were moments of black comedy. When a surgeon on the British ship *Defiance* attempted to amputate the leg of a young Irishman named Jack Spratt, Spratt held out his other leg and cried: "Never! If I lose my leg, where shall I find a match for this one?"

By the time Nelson died at 4:30 p.m., the British fleet had captured, sunk, or driven off



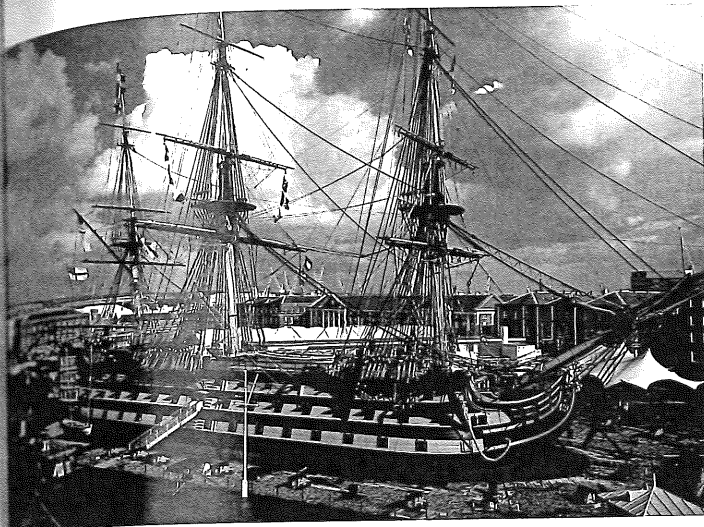
Her mizzenmast shot away, Victory was towed into the port of Gibraltar by H.M.S. Neptune (above) after the battle. Victory eventually sailed to Chatham and was refitted. In dry dock in Portsmouth since 1922, the vessel (right) now welcomes 400,000 visitors a year and still serves as a fully commissioned warship with captain, crew, and memories of triumph.

one of the largest fleet of ships of the line that had ever put to sea. Nelson's death in his moment of glory, and a hurricane-force storm after the battle that drowned thousands of sailors, dampened celebrations. But Trafalgar remains the most resounding naval victory in England's long and storied seafaring history.

Two reasons stand out for the ease of that victory: morale and better gunnery. Many of the Combined Fleet's crews, especially on the Spanish ships, were hastily pressed landsmen who had never been at sea. Many had been sick with yellow fever, which had ravaged the southern coast of Spain from 1801 to 1805. "It was like Manchester United playing a second division team riddled with injuries and self-doubt," says David Cordingly, a British naval historian. "The opposition never really believed they could win. So morale collapsed early in the battle."

Then there was the Nelson factor. "His very name was a host of itself," wrote the future king George IV, who served with Nelson as a young man. "Nelson and *Victory* were one and the same to us, and it carried dismay and terror to the hearts of our enemy."

Trafalgar was one of the last great sea battles



of the age of sail. The next time the British fought on this scale in the Atlantic, it was between steam-powered dreadnoughts in World War I. This year England marked the bicentennial of the battle with an International Festival of the Sea. But Trafalgar holds very different meanings for the three nations who met off Cádiz. For the Spanish, Trafalgar was, and is, a glorious defeat. There is even a street in Madrid called Trafalgar.

Yet the battle was the beginning of the end for Spain's empire in South America. "The loss of captains like Federico Gravina, Churrucá, and Alcalá Galiano was significant for Spain," says José González-Aller, a Spanish naval historian in Madrid. "After that, we lost the hope of continuing to be a great naval power."

Napoleon's only comment on a debacle that resulted in more than 8,000 casualties was: "A storm has occasioned us the loss of a few ships, after a battle imprudently fought."

A few months later the man responsible for that loss, Admiral Villeneuve, locked himself in his room in a hotel in Rennes, Brittany, and after a lunch of chicken and asparagus washed down with a bottle of Médoc, stabbed himself in the heart with a table knife.

"Trafalgar is still a deep wound," says Remi Monaque, "always bleeding in the heart of the French."

Nelson's body was brought home in a barrel of brandy in the great cabin of *Victory* and laid in state for three days in the Painted Hall at Greenwich. His funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral was one of the grandest in British history. The battle he won remains, with Waterloo in 1815, and the Battle of Britain in 1941, one of the nation's finest hours. The name of its hero, once described as "a little man, and none too handsome," continues to be, with only a small group of other Britons, like Shakespeare, Churchill, John Lennon, and Princess Diana, a name that every British schoolchild knows.

"Nelson is our national icon in times of adversity," says Andrew Lambert. "We don't need him much at the moment. But if you look at the 1940s, he is in every other sentence of Churchill's. He's our totem, our talisman of war." The consequences of his greatest victory are with us today. "Trafalgar saw the triumph of the Anglosphere," writes Tim Clayton. "As a result of Trafalgar, English became the global language of maritime trade."



But Nelson's was a triumph dearly bought. "I was on board our prize the *Trinidad* [*Santísima Trinidad*] getting the prisoners out of her," midshipman John Badcock wrote to his father in London a few days after the battle. "She had between 3[00] and 400 killed and wounded, her Beams were covered with Blood, Brains, and pieces of Flesh, and the after part of her Decks with wounded, some without Legs and some without an Arm; what calamities War brings on,

JOIN THE BATTLE ZONE Zoom in on the action in a high-resolution image of the painting on pages 56-7, then view an exclusive photo gallery at ngm.com/0510.

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and what a number of Lives were put to an end too on the 21st."

Paul Nicolas, the young midshipman who had wanted to lie down, was one of the lucky survivors. So was John Franklin, a junior officer on *Bellerophon*, or Billy Ruffian as it was known, who went on to make history with a disastrous expedition in search of the Northwest Passage across the Canadian Arctic.

Old Cuddie was made a baron for his role in the victory, was given command of the Mediterranean fleet, and continued pacing the quarterdeck with his faithful dog at his side.

"I am out of all patience with Bounce," Collingwood quipped in a letter to his wife, Sarah, a few

months after Trafalgar. "The consequential airs he gives himself since he became a right honorable dog are insufferable. He considers it beneath his dignity to play with commoners' dogs, and truly thinks he does them grace when he condescends to lift up his leg against them."

Sadly, Collingwood never made it back to his cabbages and potatoes. He died at sea five years later, four days after finally being recalled home, and was buried at St. Paul's alongside Nelson.

"His loss was the greatest grief to me," Collingwood had written his wife from the frigate *Euryalus* 11 days after the battle. "There is nothing like him left for gallantry and conduct in battle. It was not a foolish passion for fighting for

Royal Navy operator mechanics observed Trafalgar Day last fall on the anniversary of the battle. Halyard in hands, they raised signal flags up Victory's mainmast to spell out Nelson's timeless words: "England expects that every man will do his duty."

he was the most gentle of all human creatures and often lamented the cruel necessity of it, but it was a principle of duty which all men owed their country in defense of her laws and liberty. He valued life only as it enabled him to do good, and would not preserve it by any act he thought unworthy. . . . He is gone, and I shall lament him as long as I remain." □

PHOTO BY ROBERT CLAM

BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR 69