

THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH!

“Set up for a conjurer”



“I am set up for a conjurer!” exclaimed Admiral Lord Nelson after a meeting with Prime Minister William Pitt in September 1805 confirming him Commander in Chief of his Majesty’s ships and vessels in the Mediterranean. Such was his fame, fighting spirit and winning reputation, he was regarded as the saviour of the country. The one man who everyone thought was the real hope for stopping Napoleon’s invasion of England. A legend in his own lifetime he had become the icon for the wooden walls of the Royal Navy that protected the country.

Last month, like so many October’s before, we witnessed the burnishing of this iconic status as wreaths were laid on the quarterdeck of Nelson’s flagship HMS VICTORY, at the Nelson statue in Old Portsmouth, the Collingwood Monument at Tynemouth, and at Nelson’s tomb in St Paul’s Cathedral.

Two hundred and five years after his death at Trafalgar his spirit and example continue to infuse the ethos and leadership of today’s Royal Navy. His shadow is so long because of the feats he achieved. At the

heart of this success we find his strong religious faith, the conviction that the cause entrusted to him to defend was just, and an original and advanced style of leadership. Today, in armed forces worldwide this leadership style is effectively Mission Command. It endures because it works.

The ethos is also fundamental. It is rooted in the annals of our naval and maritime heritage, not least the memorials to those who served during the ‘golden age’ of the Royal Navy during the Georgian era. With the recent deep cuts to the Royal Navy’s strength and capability, as announced in the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), it is the ethos, the critical ‘can do’ factor, that will ensure the Naval Service gets through the difficult decade ahead.

Ironically, the ‘can do’ factor interpreted by politicians can also be an Achilles Heel, since the reassurance that comes from the Naval Service’s dynamic and positive attitude could also tempt further cuts in the future, until eventually there is no more salami to slice. Regrettably, the vital importance of a maritime defence capability, with its inherent flexibility, does not seem to have registered with those making the key defence decisions; and the lessons of the 1982 Falklands War, when a previous government sought to dispense with the navy, have gone unheeded. The importance of history should never be ignored. The lesson is the same whether it is from 30 or 300 years ago. The Royal Navy is the UK’s best means of defence.

The current cuts could have been a lot worse. It is to be hoped that the astonishing example of commitment and professionalism set by those currently deployed worldwide protecting the UK’s interests blunted the Government’s axe. At least the Royal Navy emerges with a window of opportunity in the next ten years to maintain its progress towards a balanced, more capable and world-class force in future. Meantime the SDSR strips Britain of the best means to defend itself.

The UK is an island nation with global interests. Our trade, economic prosperity and indeed our survival rely on the sea and the free passage of goods and services. Over 95 per cent of the commodities imported and exported by Britain are carried aboard ships. Being at the centre of global shipping the country’s maritime industrial sector continues to make a significant contribution to the nation’s prosperity. It therefore makes sense to retain a degree of independence as a maritime power, recognizing the lessons from our remarkable maritime history which highlight the necessity for the Royal Navy to have the capability to both project expeditionary power and ensure maritime security. Continued investment in the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Fleet Auxiliary is crucially important to Britain’s future.

Meanwhile, the skills of the Naval Service are still in great demand. In an unstable and risky world the demands could not be higher. Thanks to the astonishing commitment and professionalism of all who serve, it will continue to achieve outstanding things in spite of the latest and unwelcome reductions. Yet, the expectations that are now being made of it during this decade of transition surely echo the feelings of Lord Nelson in 1805, as the Naval Service as a whole finds itself ‘set up for a conjurer’.

The Royal Navy’s ethos and its strong link with the past were highlighted by Rear Admiral David Steel CBE in his toast to ‘the Immortal Memory’ at the Club’s Twentieth Anniversary Trafalgar Dinner at Newhouse on Saturday, 16 October. The occasion exceeded expectations, not least the raffle and auction which raised close to £800.00. Professor

Andrew Lambert gave a superb talk on The War of 1812, highlighting the action between the HMS Shannon and USS Chesapeake, and the flower table decorations, generously arranged and provided by Kathy Clark, were simply stunning.

While immensely enjoyable in their own right, occasions like the Trafalgar Dinner remind us of the conservation work we undertake and I congratulate the editors of the *Kedge Anchor* for the focus in this issue they have given to our conservation activity past, present and future. It has been a rewarding twenty years and the Council is keen to lay foundations that carry the Club forward into the next twenty years, in particular, fundraising.

One fundraising idea we propose launching next year is a register of Top Men (or Women) who have agreed to raise £100 each year for the next five years for the Nile and Copenhagen Captains' Memorial Project. Top men were sailors who worked on the highest sails, which gave them peer prestige. On completion of the task your name will be entered on the 'Nile and Copenhagen Roll of Honour', which will be produced as a special certificate for you to have at home. An electronic version will be located within the Club's website. You will, therefore, be associated with both battles and the conservations for evermore. Your views on this idea will be very welcome, so please feel free to email me at <peterwarwick@compuserve.com>.

Another essential component of The Nile and Copenhagen Captains' Memorial is the requirement for a Conservation Officer to help Council to oversee the programme. A brief description of the sort of things this role is expected to involve is featured in the conservation section and we very much hope that it is something that will appeal to one of our existing members.

You will also see a notice for the commemorative mug we have produced to celebrate the Club's first twenty years conserving the memorials to Georgian naval heroes. It is an elegant design and has been manufactured by Aynsley, one of the oldest surviving potteries in this country, founded in 1775, when Nelson was invalided home from the East Indies suffering from Malaria. The mugs are a limited edition of 150 and are we believe very reasonably priced at £10.00 each, with two pounds per mug going to support the work of the Club. They also make excellent Christmas stocking fillers!

With best wishes, including a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you all,

Peter Warwick
Chairman