

THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH.

Golden Ages of the Royal Navy

The story of the Royal Navy is a vital part of the story of Britain. Our greatest heroes are sailors; our most memorable victories were won at sea. It is a long and distinguished story, going back to the Tudors and continuing right up to the present day. One period stands out as a true 'golden age' - the years between 1756 and 1815.

This period was indeed an exceptional one for the navy. This is when the myth of its superiority [propagated by Richard Haklyut's thousand year history, *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, culminating with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588] at last became a reality. Rising through the administrative brilliance of Samuel Pepys, George Anson and the Earl of Sandwich and the inspirational leadership of Robert Blake, Edward Hawke and Horatio Nelson, the Royal Navy became the most powerful force in the world. At the end of the Napoleonic era the Royal Navy really did rule the waves.

During those years, the great sailing battleships reached their peak of perfection in famous vessels such as HMS *VICTORY*. A uniquely gifted generation of seamen - of whom Horatio Nelson was but one shining example - sailed those great ships to an almost unbroken series of decisive victories. It is a record of success unparalleled in any other period, which no other navy in the world can match.

In May of this year the 70th Anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic (BOA 70) will be commemorated with a series of events in the cities of Liverpool, London, and Derry-Londonderry. The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest continuous military campaign in World War II, at its height from mid-1940 through to the end of 1943. How, one may ask, is this commemoration relevant to the golden age of the sailing navy and therefore to The 1805 Club?

It is well known that the conviction of Britain's naval superiority encouraged sterility in strategic thinking and complacency during the 'long peace' of the nineteenth century, which led to a great disappointment in the performance of the navy during the Great War. Instead of a new Nelson, the conceit had produced the over cautious Jellicoe and the slapdash Beatty. Instead of a Trafalgar it had yielded the stalemate of Jutland and through faulty doctrine the disaster at the Dardanelles. However, while the navy's days as the superior global force were brought to an end by the Great War, lessons were learned and the Royal Navy found new glory and public affection during World War II. This period deserves to be described as its second 'golden age'.

Unlike the Great War, when for the first time since Marlborough the army serving in continental Europe was seen as the main British force, World War II was fought on the doctrine of a maritime strategy. Sea power made the final victory possible as evident in the dark days of 1940 with the retreat from Dunkirk and the defeat of Operation Sea Lion, through to the turning of the tide in the Mediterranean, to the huge amphibious landing on the coast of Normandy in June 1944 and to the Battle of the Atlantic.

For every day of the sixty-eight months of World War II, the Battle of the Atlantic raged with ruthless but varying intensity. There was no relaxation of effort or hesitation to incur risks. It demonstrated the enduring importance of control of the sea to provide a highway for the transport of raw materials, munitions, and men, to maintain the nation's security and to project power across the globe. As Sir Winston Churchill said, the Battle of the Atlantic was "the dominant factor all through the war. Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea, or in the air, depended ultimately on its outcome, and amid all other cares we viewed its changing fortunes day by day with hope or apprehension".

Here we have the parallels with the wars of the golden age of the sailing navy: The Seven Years War, The War of American Independence (a maritime war if there ever was one), and The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Like World War II they were wars sustained by ships; wars in which ships were the vital factor; wars where oceans were battlefields; wars that used convoys and blockade; wars with tactics generally incomprehensible to landmen; wars where landmen like Adolf Hitler and Napoléon Bonaparte failed to grasp the significance of sea power.



Therefore, as the commemoration for the Battle of the Atlantic gathers pace we can perceive a continuum that is based on over 250 years of experience and a rich naval heritage. We can also trace a vital thread back to the sixteenth century and words written by Richard Haklyut in *Principal Navigations*: ‘ships are to little purpose without skilful seamen’. This may be a truism, but the statement is fundamental to the record of continuity and it includes officers and ordinary seamen alike. In this issue of the *Kedge Anchor* the second in the series of articles about ‘Nelson’s Sailors’ highlights our interest in ordinary seamen like James Garrick and George Evans—seamen who would otherwise pass by unknown like the vast majority they are obliged to represent.

Haklyut’s words also remind us to include the seafarers of the merchant service and in particular the 30,000 and more men from the British Merchant Navy who lost their lives between 1939 and 1945. More than 2,400 allied ships were sunk in the Atlantic theatre. Their crews came from across the Empire and beyond. Yet, at the time the ordinary sailors, who unlike their officers wore no uniform, often suffered taunts and abuse from civilians who mistakenly thought they were shirking their patriotic duty to enlist in the armed forces. Eventually, they were issued with an ‘MN’ lapel badge to indicate they were serving in the Merchant Navy. Even today, merchant seamen and those serving in the Royal Navy are usually ‘out of sight’.

While we were a nation dependent on the sea for survival during both golden ages, nothing has changed; we remain equally dependent today. With so much of the UK’s daily requirements still moving by sea and the future of resources and energy supply so dependent on the freedom to use the sea as a highway for trade, our prosperity as a nation is intricately linked to the sea.



Emblems of pride, like the MN lapel badge, include flags, and as I write this Dispatch, I hear the good news that it has at last been agreed that the the ‘Trafalgar flags’ at St Mary the Virgin, Selling, Kent will go to the National Maritime Museum. You will recall that in 2011 the fear was that they would be sold and lost to the nation. The flags concerned are the *Minotaur’s* Union flag flown at the battle, and a flag believed to be from the captured *Neptuno*, which struck her colours to the *Minotaur*. The *Neptuno* flag is actually an Austrian rather than a Spanish ensign. They were looked after by the *Minotaur’s* Master’s Mate, Stephen Hilton, whose family have long lived at Selling in Kent, and the family later provided the flags to be part of the Hilton Chapel.

The 1805 Club was among the defined ‘interested parties’ campaigning to save the flags. Their transfer to the National Maritime Museum is a success story. The museum possesses the professional skill, experience and resources required for their long-term care and the decision means they will stay in the UK and be on display to millions of people. In fact the Union flag will be on permanent display and a centrepiece of the new gallery, *Nelson, Navy, Nation*, which opens in October this year. There will be more about this exciting gallery in the next issue of the *Kedge Anchor*.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Randy Mafit’s article in this issue about Captain John Rodgaard USN. After more than 20 years as North American Secretary and primary editor of the *Kedge Anchor*, Randy has decided to stand down from the Council of The 1805 Club at this year’s AGM. I want to be the first to offer him a huge thank you. Randy is among the Club’s founding fathers and his skill, knowledge, dedication, service, hard work and enthusiasm have been both extraordinary and exceptional. His contribution to the success of the Club has been unparalleled. In fact it has been unique. I am delighted that he will stay close to the Club and its activities and applaud the way he is handing over the North American reins to John (who incidentally is playing a significant role in BOA70).

Randy, this is the first of many thank-you’s. All I hope now is that you and Dana are well prepared to receive the many broadsides of accolades that will be aimed at you over the coming months! Bravo Zulu.

With good wishes to you all,

Peter Warwick