

CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH July 2013

"We have met the enemy and they are ours"

Two hundred years ago in the evening of 21st June 1808 the city of Vitoria played a leading role in European history. It was the day Joseph Bonaparte, the brother of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, was defeated in a battle that took place in a small, little known city only 100 kilometres from the French border in the Spanish province of Alava. The battle had unimaginable repercussions in Europe.

A few days before the battle, the Duke of Wellington, with the collaboration of his friend, Vitorian-born Lieutenant-General Miguel Ricardo de Álava y Esquibel, had advanced on the city having observed the weakness of the French deployment. There were large gaps between the French divisions and the bridges that led to the battleground on the western plains of Alava were poorly protected. Nevertheless, it was an important strategic location. Five roads radiated from the city, which is why the French had occupied and garrisoned Vitoria in 1807. It was their door into the Iberian Peninsula. After 'Wellington's Victory', as Ludwig van Beethoven's Overture No, 91 celebrating the French defeat was known, it became the allied door into France. At the news Austria, Prussia, Russia and Sweden immediately broke off negotiations with Napoleon and in October defeated him at the colossal Battle of the Nations, at Leipzig.

Twenty cruel years of war across the European continent were coming to an end and the Peninsular War that had taken up seven of those was at last over. Although the British army was not in the field at Leipzig, Wellington's campaign in the peninsula was an essential precursor to it and this highlights the vitally important role of the Royal Navy post-Trafalgar. It was Britain's maritime supremacy that 'boxed-in' Napoleon's territorial hegemony by both breaking the Continental System and supplying the British Army throughout the Peninsular campaign.

"If anyone wishes to know the history of this war, I will tell them that it is our maritime superiority [that] gives me the power of maintaining my army while the enemy are unable to do so." Wellington's words reveal that he fully appreciated the strategic importance of the naval support for his campaign. Moreover, by supplying him with all provisions including food, clothing and arms, his army did not have live off the land as the French did, and this won him crucial local support.

General Álava, who came from a noble military Vitorian family and served as an *aide de camp* to Wellington throughout the Peninsular War, has a special place in the story. He holds the distinction of being the only person known to be at both the Battle of Trafalgar and the Battle of Waterloo. At Trafalgar he fought against the British as a naval *aide de camp* aboard Admiral Don Federico Gravina's flagship the *Principe de Asturias* and at Waterloo he was on the Duke of Wellington's personal staff as Spain's military representative. By this time he and the Duke had become close friends.

The summer of 1813 also witnessed a battle that is less well known in Britain. At the western end of Lake Erie, another outstanding personality, twenty-eight-year-old Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, was making a name for himself by fighting a different Trafalgar veteran, Commander Robert Heriot Barclay, Royal Navy. Barclay was a lieutenant at the battle aboard HMS *Swiftsure*. He now found himself in a scene of operations involving regular naval officers but vessels that although sizeable would not have survived the open sea. They were built of 'last year's' unseasoned timber, were of shallow draft, were held together by wooden pegs and carried whatever armament could be scraped together from cannon to muskets. This was the second year of the War of 1812 and with the United States threatening Canada, the fresh water inland Great Lakes had become a battleground for raids and skirmishes.

The most significant was the furious engagement between Perry and Barclay in September 1813. It raged for two hours. In the British ships the captains and lieutenants were all killed or wounded, Barclay himself being hit five times and taken prisoner. Perry's newly built flagship, USS *Lawrence*, christened after the dead commander of the frigate USS *Chesapeake* captured by Captain Sir Philip Broke off Boston on 1 June, was shot to pieces. His other ships were disabled, but keeping his head he shifted his blue flag with Captain James Lawrence's swords embroidered on it: "Don't give up the ship", to his one undamaged boat, and refusing to admit defeat attacked the now disorganised British line. He took his exhausted enemy by surprise and won the day for the Americans.

The British army ashore, threatened by starvation, evacuated from Detroit and the whole of the United States was, for a short while, clear of invaders. "We have met the enemy and they are ours", was Perry's summary of the action. His words could have applied equally to Vitoria and Leipzig.

'Yankee Perry, Better than English Cider' was the title of a popular song written to celebrate his exploits, and begins with the verse:

Huzza! For the brave Yankee boys,
Who touch' upon John Bull on Lake Erie,
Who gave 'em a taste of our toys,
From the fleet of brave Commodore Perry.

It seems fitting to honour this American hero as we say thank you to Randy Mafit for his twenty three-years of service to The 1805 Club in North America (see events notice re 14 February 2014) and welcome Captain John Rodgaard USN Rtd, who raised his pennant following his election to the Club's Council in May. Only two weeks before, they had both been at The Glorious First of June lunch, arranged by member Stephen Walwyn. I should like to thank Stephen and his Bay Area friends for their initiative and enthusiasm and in so doing acknowledge the strength of our North American membership and its importance to the Club.



Present chairman Peter Warwick (left) warmly thanked our lecturer, the distinguished surgeon Mr Michael Crumplin.

John was able to join us at the Members' Day on Saturday, 18 May; and what a day it was! Not only did we enjoy a stimulating Cecil Isaacson Memorial Lecture by Michael Crumplin FRS about naval surgery and Nelson's mortal wound, but never before has the Club witnessed such a splendid turnout of members – over 60 of you – plus about 10 guests, some of whom have since joined. It was only circumstances that caused us to move away from Greenwich for the AGM, but given the turn out and the fantastic atmosphere generated, the message is clear: a central London location is much better for everyone.

We look forward to returning to central London again next year. This may or may not be at the East India Club, but it was certainly an excellent venue and given the historical

connections that I have highlighted in this dispatch, it is probably fitting to leave you with one more that relates the East India Club itself. Its home at 16 St James's Square, has a direct connection to the official Waterloo Dispatch written by the Duke of Wellington on 19 June 1815.



There was much lively conversation over welcoming coffee in the Hogarth Room, surrounded by prints by the artist.

The Dispatch was carried to London by Major The Honorable Henry Percy, aged 30, serving with the 14th Light Dragoons. He had been posted as an *aide de camp* to Wellington and would most likely have known General Álava. After an eventful journey from Waterloo to London, one that compares with Lieutenant John Richard Lapenotiere's

carrying Collingwood's Trafalgar Dispatch, Percy announced the victory to the Cabinet. The Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, then accompanied Percy to Mrs Edward Boehm's house at 16 St James's Square, where the Prince Regent was dining. Percy's final mission was to lay the two French Imperial Eagles captured during the battle at the Prince's feet. This took place in the room adjacent to where we enjoyed our Members' Day. Isn't history marvelous!

With kind regards and best wishes to you all.

Peter Warwick, Chairman