

## THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH



Peter Warwick

### “Perseverance . . . will most probably meet its reward”

Call me a romantic if you will, but I have started writing this issue's Chairmans' Dispatch at 6am on Monday, 21<sup>st</sup> October on the very weekday (Monday) of the 208<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and at the time that the Combined Fleet of France and Spain was sighted by the British fleet! Thomas Atkinson, *VICTORY*'s sailing master, recorded in the ship's log, 'At 6 observed the enemy E by S distance 10 or 12 miles.'

Given that the battle did not start for another six hours. Nelson and the fifty thousand other souls present that day had much time to contemplate their fate. We know that at the climax of his career Nelson was composed and in excellent spirits. He wrote a codicil to his will bequeathing Lady Hamilton and their daughter Horatia to the nation, and then wrote the few lines that are regarded as amongst the finest written by any soldier or sailor about to go into battle. The prose is unfussy and mellifluous and surgeon William Beatty described it as a 'devout and fervent ejaculation, which must be universally admired as truly characteristic of the Christian hero'. The prayer was written in his personal pocket book and, as ever thinking of posterity, he made a copy of it. It is always worth quoting in full:

*Monday, Octr 21st, 1805 at day Light saw the Enemys Combined fleet from East to E.S.E. bore away made the Signal for Order of Sailing, and to prepare for Battle the Enemy with their heads to the Southward, at seven the Enemy wearing in succession.*

*May the Great God whom I worship grant to my Country*

*and for the benefit of Europe in General a great and Glorious Victory; and may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it, and may humanity after Victory be the predominant feature in the British Fleet. For myself individually I commit my life to Him who made me, and may His blessing light upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully. To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted to me to Defend. Amen. Amen. Amen.*

Meanwhile, in Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood's Lee Division Captain John Cooke of the *BELLEROPHON* was careful to ensure that his 'Reflections on Fortitude', written a few weeks earlier, were safely in his pocket. Less well known, this is also worth quoting:

*The Virtue of Fortitude tends greatly to the happiness of the individual, by giving composure and presence of mind; and keeping the other passions in due subordination. Nothing so effectively inspires it, as rational piety; the fear of God, is the best security against every other fear. A true estimate of human life; its shortness and uncertainty; the numberless evils and temptations to which by a long continuance in this world we must unavoidably be exposed; ought by no means to discourage, or to throw any gloom on our future prospects; they should teach us: that many things are more formidable than Death; and that nothing is lost, but much gained, when by the appointment of providence, a well spent life is brought to a conclusion.*

*Let it be considered too, that pusillanimity, and fearfulness, can never avail us anything. On the contrary, they debase our nature, poison all our comforts, and make us despicable in the eyes of others; they darken our reason, disconcert our schemes, enfeeble our efforts, extinguish our hopes, and add tenfold poignancy to all the evils of life. In battle, the Brave is in less danger than the Coward; in less danger of even death and wounds, because better prepared to defend himself; in far less danger of infelicity; and has before him the animating hope of victory and honour.*

*So in life the man of true fortitude is in less danger of disappointment than others are, because his understanding is clear and his mind disencumbered; he is prepared to meet calamity without the fear of sinking under it; and he has before him the near prospect of another life, in which they who piously bear the evils of this, will obtain a glorious reward.*

John Cooke was killed at Trafalgar and his memorial is next to Nelson's tomb. It is he and the many others on both sides who lost their lives whom we remember on or close to 21<sup>st</sup> October when toasting, 'The Immortal Memory of Admiral Lord Nelson *and all those who fell with him.*'

When we pay tribute to Nelson's Immortal Memory every year, we celebrate the man and his deeds as viewed at the *end* of his heroic life. The way we judge him is based largely on his stunning victories and his bravery in battle, and the final assessment is greatly influenced by his professionalism and leadership during the last two years of his life. At this time Nelson displayed a superb ability to manage a fleet at sea, maintaining it at peak fighting efficiency without recourse to dockyard refits. He played the role of diplomat with the many rulers and allies whose countries bordered the Mediterranean

and even as far as St Petersburg. He watched over the activities of pirates on the North African coast, and cleverly gathered and assessed valuable intelligence from all quarters. In sum, he possessed, as Earl St Vincent described, ‘the magic art of infusing the same spirit into others which inspired their own actions, exclusive of other talents and *habits of business* not common to naval officers.’

Nelson does seem to have pulled together everything that is positive about his 34 years of naval service, allowing his reputation to rise above that of all other naval officers of the age. This is undoubtedly why Lord Barham, the First Lord of the Admiralty, chose him to lead the scratch fleet, which was hurriedly put together to do battle with the Combined Fleet at Cadiz in a manner not dissimilar from the assembly of Task Force sent to the Falklands in 1982. We know that Nelson recognised the heavy responsibility that was being placed on him from his remark to Prime Minister William Pitt when he said that he was ‘set up as a conjurer’ to save England. Essentially, he had become the nation’s saviour.

When we look at Nelson’s career it might be expected that it followed a steady upward curve, but those who know his life in more detail are well aware that there were some very serious setbacks, sometimes the result of his own doing, and that his career path was more like that of a roller coaster ride!

In order to appreciate how he reached his heroic apogee after such a fluctuating, even erratic, career we should reflect on the words which conclude his fragment of autobiography, written in 1799, “Thus may be exemplified by my Life, that perseverance in any profession will most probably meet its reward. Without having any inheritance, or having been fortunate in prize-money, I have received all the Honours of my profession, been created a Peer of Great Britain, and I may say to the reader, ‘GO THOU AND DO LIKEWISE.’”

The key word here is *perseverance*. Nelson was driven by a great need to achieve and he rarely faltered in his attempts to do so. Very rarely is this quality referred to, yet without it there would be no Immortal Memory. It is a quality that anyone young or old can aspire to and in any walk of life. It is one that makes Nelson’s story as relevant as ever.

It was the main thought that ran through my mind yesterday, when for the second year running, I had the pleasure and genuine honour of laying a wreath on behalf of The 1805 Club at the foot of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square as part of the National Trafalgar Day Parade, the salute being taken by Rear Admiral S J Woodcock OBE. This is a singular and permanent privilege given to the Club. And now in a few hours’ time I shall be joined by members of the Club and others at Lord Nelson’s tomb in the crypt of St Paul’s Cathedral for the First Sea Lord’s annual Trafalgar Day wreath laying ceremony, which the Club re-modeled four years ago. Perseverance in the pursuit of our charitable objectives helped to attain these honours and perseverance will be a watchword for the Club as we move forward.

With kind regards and best wishes to you all,  
Peter

Peter Warwick  
Chairman