

THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH



Peter Warwick

“Humanity after victory”

“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 humanity after victory be the predominant feature* in the British fleet.” The italics are mine. I am confident that you will know that these lines are taken from Lord Nelson’s beautiful and final prayer composed within a few hours of the start of the Battle of Trafalgar. I have selected them because they highlight a universal wisdom that transcends and resonates with two events in June 2014: the movement to end rape as a weapon in war and the commemorations for the 70th anniversary of D-Day.

In 1812, the sequel to the third British siege of Badajoz in Spain witnessed the British attacking force indulging in an orgy of drunken rape and plunder. All control was lost. The mayhem was made more horrific since the inhabitants of the town were Britain’s Spanish allies who had been overrun by Napoleon’s forces. This atrocity provides evidence of some sort of acceptance of the spoils of war being taken by the victors, even though the officers at the time were trying to restrain their men.

There are many other examples from ancient history to the present day. For instance, as the Second World War drew to a close there are many recorded incidents of rape both during combat operations and during the subsequent occupation of Germany. These crimes were perpetrated by the Red Army, the US and British forces. Rape appears to be a characteristic of the culture of war; a timeless phenomenon, accepted, but unacceptable.

There appear to be two broad circumstances when it occurs in combat. The first is in the immediate aftermath of battle, when blood is up and the chain of command loses control. The second is when the culture of the fighting institution condones a sense that it is simply an eye for an eye. At the conclusion of a battle, when emotions are barely under control, fear is replaced by relief and a desire to take revenge on anyone who is perceived to be on the other side.

Nelson recognized this when referring to *humanity after victory*. As a leader he knew that post-combat behavior was a crime and

also understood that it was a leadership responsibility to instill standards that would control it. He did this by example, such as at the Battle of Copenhagen on 2 April 1801 where out of humanity he sent a truce ashore addressed to ‘the Brothers of Englishmen the Danes’, which was received by the Crown Prince who was witnessing the inevitable total destruction of his fleet by the continuing pounding of superior British gunnery.

Good commanders, like Nelson, will, indeed must, encourage aggression and motivate their subordinates to take risks in the most terrifying circumstances but at the same time they will always try to ensure that behavior is proportionate. This is just one of the reasons why Nelson’s leadership style is highly relevant to today. As combat has become more conditional, leadership has become harder. We have seen this in Afghanistan with the introduction of controversial policies such as ‘courageous restraint’, which if taken to the extreme places our own people at greater risk than the enemy for fear of harming innocent civilians. These are complex situations that Nelson did not have to grapple with, but the spirit enthusing his overall behavior still make his leadership style inspirational and we can readily imagine him handling them with rigour and imagination as easily as we can visualise him adapting with aplomb to command in today’s Royal Navy, even though the highly technical and scientific environment of electronic warfare seems far removed from the wood and tar of the quarterdeck of a ship like HMS VICTORY. The ethos of good leadership is a constant.

It would be a mistake to suggest that blame for atrocity lies only with armed forces because there are too many occasions where it is being used deliberately to humiliate, intimidate and subjugate an enemy in a systematic matter; where it is being sanctioned by authorities and governments. Therefore wider national cultures have to be addressed.

The D-Day landings, the largest seaborne invasion in history, were carried out *for the benefit of Europe in general*. Beginning on 6 June 1944 more than 150,000 Allied troops landed on a 50-mile stretch of beaches on the coast of Normandy, in Nazi-held France. Entrenched behind massive concrete walls and bunkers were more than 50,000 Wehrmacht soldiers, many conscripted from Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. Seventy years later, in an extraordinary and humbling occasion heads of state, notably from Britain, the United States, Russia, France and Germany joined veterans – most in their late eighties or nineties – to pay their respects to those who lost their lives. It was the last time they will gather on such an anniversary.

The scale of the suffering dwarfs Allied losses in recent wars: around 10,000 troops and civilians died in the landings alone, 2,700 of them British. The killing in Normandy went on for two months afterwards until the decisive Allied breakout at Falaise. In the US cemetery behind ‘bloody Omaha beach, site of the heaviest fighting, more than 9,000 graves stretch into the distance. Such moments represent courage and sacrifice on a scale difficult to comprehend today after almost seven decades of peace in Western Europe. These men’s sacrifice in concert with their Russian allies, whose death toll in World War II topped a staggering 20 million men, was decisive.

Nelson had recently celebrated his 47th birthday when he wrote his prayer, but the majority of those serving with him at Trafalgar were much younger. It has always been thus. “I was just 21 years old”, writes Joachim Dahms, who in 1944 served in the Sixth Paratrooper Regiment of the Wehrmacht at Carentan in Normandy. Confirming the brutalization of war

he continues, “There was no place for pity or compassion, and I had no idea that the enemy I was ordered to shoot at would be, decades later, the same people I would greet as friends every year at the anniversary of the invasion.” Those Allied troops who braved the murderous machine gun fire as they approached the beaches were in many cases even younger. In fact the Allied planners had deliberately placed 19 and 20 year-olds in the first waves because lacking of combat experience they wouldn’t comprehend the terror they would face when the ramps of their landing craft went down.

Lieutenant Edward Thornbrough Parker, Nelson’s favourite and most enigmatic protégé was only 23 when he was killed in action also in a cross-channel action. Nelson frequently referred to him in intimate terms as his ‘dear son and friend’. Under his patronage ‘little Parker’ was rapidly promoted to commander and accompanied Nelson at the negotiations following the truce at the Battle of Copenhagen. He became close with both Nelson and Emma, Lady Hamilton even to the point of holidaying with them in England and proudly called himself a ‘Nelsonite’. When Nelson was posted to command the anti-invasion forces in the English Channel Parker joined him and they worked closely together on the operations leading to the failed attack on Boulogne on 5 August 1801. Parker’s thigh was shattered during the attack and he was taken to lodgings in Deal, where his leg was amputated. He suffered terribly and died on 27 September, two days before Nelson’s birthday. Both he and Emma were stricken with grief and Nelson arranged and paid for a full military funeral and erected a monument to Parker’s memory. So close was their friendship that Nelson requested some of Parker’s hair which he preserved for burial in his own grave.

The monument and grave were eventually removed, but in 2001 The 1805 Club erected a bronze plaque to Parker, which can be seen today in the top southern corner of the former graveyard. The Club also raised the only memorial plaque to all those who fought at the Battle of Copenhagen, not least to ‘the Brothers of Englishmen the Danes’. Plaques will be a feature of our conversations in future and the survey of past conservations, conducted recently, has identified sites for retrospective plaques. Unlike Parker’s they will not be made of bronze because we have found that stainless steel is much better.

We are currently determining our conservation projects for 2014/15 and have begun work on a new scheme which is designed to discover more graves and monuments that require conservation, rather than finding them *ad hoc* as we do now. In particular we are keen to identify graves of ordinary sailors and Royal Marines.

One of the reasons the Club is able to plan like this is due to the growing number of Topmen. We now have 28. Thanks to their generosity we can think more adventurously. Their commitment to pledge £100 per annum for five years provides a predictable annual cash flow for our conservation activities, which allows us to plan ahead with confidence. I should like to reiterate Council’s thanks to our Topmen and highlight how invaluable is their commitment to our work. Our target is 50 Topmen and each receives an attractively designed certificate signed by our President Admiral Sir Jonathon Band.

With kind regards and best wishes to you all,

Peter Warwick
Chairman