

Trafalgar - 200 Years on

The Battle of Trafalgar was fought on the 21st of October 1805 off Cape Trafalgar on the Spanish coast, between the combined fleets of Spain and France and the Royal Navy. It was the last great sea action of the period and its significance to the outcome of the war in Europe is still debated by historians.

See Trafalgar celebrations - 200 years on: [website](#)

Was your ancestor involved? [Check here](#)

[Click for more in depth details on Nelson and the battle](#)

Background:

In 1805 under Napoleon, the French were the dominant military power on the European continent, while the British controlled the seas. The British, during the course of the war, managed to impose a naval blockade on France. This blockade both affected French trade and had the effect of keeping the French from fully mobilizing their own naval resources. Although there were a number of occasions when French naval ships evaded the blockade, they were never able to fully exploit this or inflict a major defeat on the British.

The British control of the seas also enabled them to attack French interests at home and abroad with relative ease.

When the Napoleonic war broke out in 1803, after the short lived Peace of Amiens, Napoleon Bonaparte was determined to invade Britain. To do this he had to ensure that the Royal Navy would be unable to disrupt the invasion flotilla while the invasion was in progress. This would require the French fleet to control the English Channel.

At that time, there were major French fleets in Brest in Brittany and Toulon on the Mediterranean coast. Other ports on the French Atlantic coast had smaller but not insignificant squadrons. In addition, France and Spain were now allied so the Spanish fleet based in Cádiz was also available.

Napoleon's plan was for the French and Spanish fleets in the Mediterranean and Cádiz to break through the blockade and combine in the West Indies. Then they would return and assist the fleet in Brest emerge and in combination clear the English Channel of Royal Navy ships and ensure a safe passage for the invasion barges.

Early in 1805, Admiral Lord Nelson was commanding the British fleet blockading Toulon. Unlike Cornwallis, who commanded the Channel Fleet's tight blockade of Brest, Nelson adopted a loose blockade in the hope of luring the French fleet into leaving port. Nelson hoped to then engage the French in a major battle and so too, destroy them. However, the danger of this tactic was that the French would emerge and evade Nelson's forces and so be free. This is what occurred. Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve's ships sailed when Nelson's forces were blown off their station by storms.

While Nelson was searching for them in the Mediterranean, Villeneuve passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, rendezvoused with the Spanish fleet and sailed according to plan to the West Indies.

Once Nelson realised that the French had evaded him and crossed the Atlantic Ocean, he abandoned his station in the Mediterranean and pursued them. This was typical of his attitude that the leader on the spot could make the best decisions.

In the West Indies, the French fleet again evaded Nelson's forces; on one occasion, they passed close to each other but without detection by either side.

The French sailed for Europe to break the blockade at Brest but after an encounter with a squadron under Admiral Sir Robert Calder which resulted in the capture of two Spanish ships, Villeneuve decided not to try and join the fleet in Brest and sailed back to Cádiz where he was blockaded by a small British squadron under Admiral Collingwood.

Nelson's forces followed the French back and joined Collingwood to enforce the blockade of Cádiz. Nelson returned to England for a short time before sailing to join Collingwood and assuming command of the blockading forces. Nelson wanted to bring the Combined Fleet to battle so most of the British fleet remained at sea out of sight of land with only a few frigates close inshore to monitor the fleet's movements.

€

Trafalgar - The Battle:

Battle

At Cádiz, in Spain, Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve, hearing that Napoleon had sent a replacement who was on his way to take over Villeneuve's command, the combined French and Spanish fleet finally set sail. It took two days, October 19 and October 20, for the combined fleet to clear the harbour at Cádiz, and on the morning of October 21, the British approached as the Spanish and French ships were still struggling to form up south of Cádiz in light and contrary winds.

The French had 18 ships of the line: Bucentaure, Formidable, Neptune, Indomptable, Algeiras, Pluton, Mont-Blanc, Intrepide, Swiftsure, Aigle, Scipion, Duguay-Trouin, Berwick, Argonaut, Achille, Redoutable, Fougueux, and Heros.

The Spanish had 15: Santissima Trinidad, Principe de Asturias, Santa Anna, Rayo, Neptuno, Argonauta, Bahama, Montanez, San Augustin, San Ildefonso, San Juan Nepomuceno, Monarca, San Francisco de Asis, San Justo, and San Leandro.

Nelson had 27 ships of the line: Britannia, Royal Sovereign, Victory, Dreadnought, Neptune, Prince, Temeraire, Tonnant, Achilles, Ajax, Belleisle, Bellerophon, Colossus, Conqueror, Defence, Defiance, Leviathan, Mars, Minotaur, Orion, Revenge, Spartiate, Swiftsure, Thunderer, Africa, Agamemnon, and Polyphemus.

The battle progressed largely according to Nelson's plan. At 11:35, Nelson sent throughout the fleet the famous flag signal, "England expects that every man will do his duty". He then attacked the French line in two columns, leading one column in Victory; while Admiral Collingwood in Royal Sovereign led the other column.

As the battle opened, the French and Spanish were in a ragged line headed north as the two British columns approached from the west at almost a right angle. Nelson himself led the north column from Victory, while one of his subordinates, Collingwood, led the south column, flying his flag on Royal Sovereign.

Just before the South column

engaged the allied forces, Collingwood said to his officers "Now, gentlemen, let us do something today which the world may talk of hereafter." Because the winds were very light during the battle, all the ships were moving extremely slowly and the lead British ships were under fire from several of the enemy for almost an hour before their own guns would bear. At 12:45, Victory cut the enemy line between Villeneuve's flagship Bucentaure and Redoutable. Meanwhile, Royal Sovereign had already engaged the Spanish Santa Anna. A general mêlée ensued, and during that fight, Victory locked masts with the French Redoutable. The captain of Redoutable had trained his crew to use their muskets to fire on enemy officers on the quarterdeck. A musket bullet fired from the mizzenmast of the Redoutable struck Nelson in the left shoulder, and passed through his body lodging in his spine. Nelson was carried below decks and died at about 16:30, as the battle that would make him a legend was ending in favour of the British.

The British captured 22 vessels of the Franco-Spanish fleet and lost not one. As Nelson lay dying, he ordered the fleet to anchor as a storm was predicted. However, when the storm blew up many of the severely damaged ships sank or ran aground and a few were recaptured by the French and Spanish prisoners overcoming the small prize crews or by ships sallying out from Cadiz.

Àâ€š

NELSON

Why is Nelson celebrated as a hero?

Nelson - triumph over adversity...

Nelson played a vital role in securing Britain's freedom 200 years ago, both stopping the terrifying threat of invasion by Napoleon's France and establishing British naval supremacy for the next century. Born in Norfolk in 1758, Nelson joined the Royal Navy as a midshipman at 12 years old. By the age of 21 he was a Captain and had sailed half way round the world from India to the Americas.

He went on to inspire his men to victory in several major sea battles including the Nile, Copenhagen and of course Trafalgar. As a leader, he was charismatic, courageous and a genius at reading the battle in that most unpredictable of arenas - the sea.

Nelson was controversial and not without his critics but his life still inspires many people across the globe.

His qualities of courage, leadership, perseverance and humanity are as relevant today as they were 200 years ago.

Nelson's story unites triumph over personal adversity with victory over the enemy. He suffered many hardships during his career, including a spell of long-term unemployment.

But even losing an arm and being blinded in one eye in battle did not stop him from fighting on heroically until his death in action at Trafalgar in 1805.