Below: The aptly named HMS *Victory* served as Lord Nelson's flagship in the Trafalgar campaign (Chris Sharp). Right: This commemorative medal was struck at the expense of its manufacturer, Matthew Boulton. Over 14,000 of these were presented to the men who fought under Nelson at Trafalgar (HiP/Art Resource, NY).
How a short, one-armed, half-blind parson's son became BRITAIN'S GREATEST Naval HERO

by Chris Sharp

Column and Trafalgar Square are two of Britain's iconic landmarks. In this year, which celebrates the 200th anniversary of Lord Nelson's death at Trafalgar, it is appropriate to reappraise the achievements of a national hero whose twice life-size statue stands upon a 170-foot pedestal in the center of London.

In portraiture, caricature and fancy dress, Nelson is instantly recognizable as the semi-blinded, one-armed diminutive naval officer whose derring-do destroyed French and Spanish fleets, and who was involved in an interesting ménage à trois with Lady Emma Hamilton. Incidentally, he never wore an eye patch and it is questionable that he saved Britain from invasion by Napoleon. He did, however, say, "Kiss me, Hardy," and Captain Thomas Hardy did kiss him, twice. Above all, however, Nelson was an outstanding naval tactician.

We know little of Nelson's childhood. Horatio Nelson was born on September 19, 1758, in Burnham Thorpe, Norfolk, where his father, Edmund Nelson, was rector. His mother, Catherine Suckling, who died when Horatio was 9, was related to Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister.

This early biographical brevity lacks insight into his character's formation. Nelson's sense of devotion to God, country and duty possibly originated from his father's sermons, which probably had a contemporary nationalistic tone. Nelson is revered as a paragon of manly virtues: boldness, ruthlessness, recklessness, audacity. All those traits appear to have been nascent in Nelson when he joined the navy at the age of 12 in 1771. His naval career was simply a theater for their expression and refinement as he strived for glory.

Nelson, on his own initiative, requested his father's assistance to enlist into the Royal Navy. This was achieved through two uncles, Maurice and William Suckling, who had risen to influential levels in the naval hierarchy. Initially, Captain Maurice Suckling ensured young Nelson's assignments were appropriate to obtaining seafaring skills and promotions. There is a whiff of nepotism in Nelson's early promotions as he learned the ropes of sailing, but the 18th-century navy worked more on patronage than merit.

For 21 years Nelson was based in the North American or West Indian stations. This was a frustrating period for him as there were few opportunities for action; what little action there was left him wanting more. Nonetheless it was an instructive period.

Through the auspices of Admirals Lord Hood and Sir John Jervis, Nelson learned that a well-disciplined ship was not a vessel ruled by the cat-o'-nine-tails but one where every man knew, and flawlessly executed, his duty. Nelson also came to understand that Britain's sovereignty was dependent upon sustaining economic superiority over France and Spain; any affront to this was unpatriotic and had to be stopped.

Nelson returned to London in 1792 with clear ideas of naval leadership and a wife and stepson, but he lamented not having had the opportunity to participate in a major naval battle. He told friends in letters that it was his ambition to lead a line of battleships into glorious action and die a hero.

The danger Nelson craved was soon to come. In 1793 the uneasy peace with France ended. Nelson was placed in command of HMS Agamemnon and sent to serve under Admiral Jervis in the Mediterranean. Over the next five years he repeatedly distinguished himself with displays of bravery, coolness and fine judgment. In this period he was blinded in the right eye at Corsica in the Battle of Calvi. Also in this time, during an overzealous assault on Santa Cruz, Canary Islands, he received the wound that resulted in his arm being amputated.
Launched in 1765, HMS Victory remains the world’s oldest commissioned warship. It is still manned by British naval officers and ratings, and is open to the public throughout the year. Victory sits in drydock at the Royal Naval Dockyard in Portsmouth (Chris Sharp).
The battle-scarred Nelson came fully to the attention of the nation after the Battle of Cape St. Vincent. The combined desire to cause mayhem in the French fleet and his innate craving for glory impelled Nelson to courageously board and capture two enemy ships. Nelson enjoyed public admiration for his combative achievements, admiration that he flamed with letters to influential newspapers. The bestowal of a pension, knighthood and promotion to rear admiral further massaged his insatiable ego.

More glory shortly followed. Nelson was ordered to hunt and destroy the French Mediterranean fleet. Napoleon’s strategy was to invade Egypt and cut Britain’s vital commercial route to India, so an economically weakened Britain would not threaten his European ambitions. With a fleet of 14 ships, Nelson located the French fleet at anchor in Aboukir Bay, near Alexandria, on August 1, 1798. The Battle of the Nile was about to commence.

Though it was late in the day, Nelson, seeking glory and a decisive victory, attacked. His strategy was audacious and, as he was victorious, is considered brilliant. Traditionally, naval battles were conducted with opposing fleets forming parallel lines and pummeling each other until, through attrition, one side was clearly defeated.

Pierre Charles de Villeneuve, the French rear admiral, anchored his ships against shallow water believing the British ships would be unable to sail there, forcing them to come alongside his powerfully armed and prepared deepwater flank. His confidence was such that he did not prepare his shallow-water flank’s defenses. Nelson, a ruthless predator, crossed the enemy’s poorly armed prows and sterns, into the shallow water and bombarded the French ships’ unprotected flank. It worked to devastating effect: Nelson annihilated the French fleet.

News of Nelson’s victory was rapturously received in London. The one-eyed, one-armed rear admiral became the idol of England. Nelson thoroughly enjoyed the adulation, the conferral of a barony and promotion to vice admiral. Unfortunately for Nelson, his Nile victory was so complete that it resulted in a frustrating few years of naval inactivity.

Those years were passed in Naples, where his affair with Lady Hamilton, wife of the British ambassador there, flourished and with whom he openly returned to London in November 1800. He deserted his wife a year later. A vicious press scandalized the adultery, which caused some decline in his popularity.

The vitriol abated in 1801 when Nelson, who had been appointed Vice Admiral of the Blue on January 1, again sailed into battle, this time against the Danes. At the Battle of Copenhagen Nelson turned a potential disaster into victory. His superior, Admiral Hyde Parker—whom Nelson held in low esteem—signaled the British fleet to retreat. Nelson, convinced he could win, is reputed to have put his telescope to his blind eye and said, “I really do not see the signal.” The story goes that from this act, the expression “turning a blind eye” entered the English language. What was of consequence was Nelson’s victory and the reward of promotion to viscount. Then, for nearly two years, Lord Nelson languished in a world devoid of action at sea.
By 1803 Napoleon was redrawing the European political chessboard and once more menacing Britain's sovereignty. Nelson, now 45, was recalled from semi-retirement to take command of the British Mediterranean fleet on board HMS Victory, which, in an ironic subtext of history, had been commissioned the year of his birth.

In 1805, Spain was allied with France; Napoleon was amassing thousands of troops in the French channel ports awaiting the arrival of the combined Franco-Spanish fleet to form an invasion flotilla. A successful invasion depended upon drawing off the protective British fleet. As a ruse, the Franco-Spanish fleet headed for the Caribbean, pursued by Nelson. The enemy fleet, ahead of Nelson, was prevented from reaching the channel ports and diverted to Cadiz, Spain. Viscount Nelson was again the hero of the hour because he had prevented the French from seizing Britain's Caribbean possessions. Despite Napoleon abandoning his invasion of Britain, his fleet was still a substantial menace.

The Franco-Spanish fleet left Cadiz on October 19, 1805. By 1 a.m. on the 20th Nelson knew its precise location, but delayed engagement because he wanted the ships to be farther from their bolt-hole. During the night, Nelson's captains reflected on his last memorandum, known as the Nelson Touch, which finished, "In case signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood, no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy." This was tactical excellence. All his captains, appointed by him on merit and in his confidence, knew the battle plan, but Admiral Nelson was allowing for unforeseen contingencies.

The viscount's plan was simple and bold. The British fleet would divide into two lines and cut the Franco-Spanish fleet in three; the van would be isolated from the action and Nelson's 27 ships would attack the mid and rear lines—brilliant. Except there would be a period, perhaps 20 minutes, when the British ships would be unable to return fire. Nelson, confident as ever in his plan, courageously led the attack. In the final approach on the enemy fleet, Lord Nelson made the signal that is now synonymous with his name: "England expects that every man will do his duty."

Nelson was about to do just that. At approximately 12:35, HMS Victory came under fire and was unable to return fire until 1. At 1:15 Nelson was shot by a sniper from the rigging of Redoubtable. He remarked to Hardy, Victory's captain, "They have done for me at last, my backbone is shot through."

Admiral Nelson was carried to the orlop deck where, to cacophonous roars, the shuddering of cannon recoils and the reek of smoke, cordite and fear, he was hopelessly nursed by surgeon William Beatty. At 3:30 Hardy told Nelson they had achieved a glorious victory. Nelson begged Hardy to kiss him, which Hardy did on the cheek and the forehead. Horatio Nelson died with the closing words, "Thank God I have done my duty," having achieved his primary ambition: a glorious death in battle.

Nelson's death in victory compound his heroic status. His elevation to supreme hero, almost a deity, was confirmed as his state funeral on January 9, 1806, was
Nelson's audacious battle plan was to divide and conquer, separating the French and Spanish fleet into three weaker flotillas (Gardiner's Atlas, 1892).

Britannia Ruled the Waves unchallenged for more than 100 years.

solemnly witnessed by tens of thousands. Lord Nelson's death was immediately commemorated in monument, in street and building name and in contemporary song, art and poetry. Nelson would have approved of Lord Byron's accolade describing him as "Britannia's God of War."

Nelson's legacy goes beyond art and place names. His actions at Trafalgar influenced global military and political affairs for more than a century. Nelson's victory established the British navy as the most powerful in the world, such that Britannia ruled the waves unchallenged for more than 100 years.

Victory at Trafalgar also gave the nation of shopkeepers the confidence and arrogance to believe that their imperial ambitions were correct. It was the foundation and impulse for Britain's colonial and industrial growth into a world-dominating power. This is epitomized in "Rule Britannia," a powerfully rendered song reflecting Britain's self-confidence, a song that Britons still passionately sing.

Trafalgar also had a broader significance in world history. Nelson's rout of the Franco-Spanish fleet, whose losses included 18 ships, 6,000 killed or wounded, and over 20,000 taken prisoner, so stung Napoleon that he never initiated another naval campaign. Admiral Nelson's losses were zero ships and approximately 1,700 killed or wounded. For this, Nelson is credited with saving Britain from a Napoleonic invasion even though Napoleon's geopolitical ambitions had changed prior to Trafalgar.

For the Spanish, Trafalgar proved catastrophic. Spain was a hemorrhaging nation with domestic power struggles and a faltering economy. Defeat at Trafalgar exacerbated those problems. Without its fleet, Spain was cut off from its Central and South American colonies and their riches. Spain was also unable to send military reinforcements to sustain its hegemony in the Americas. Many of those colonies, today's sovereign Latin American nations, can trace their independence movements back to Spain's crushing defeat at Trafalgar.

In this bicentennial year of Nelson's death, visitors to Trafalgar Square may look up to Horatio Nelson in a renewed light. Soaring above them is a little man whose innate predatory instincts for victory and glory shaped much of their heritage; without his victories at Cape St. Vincent, the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar, today's geopolitical map would be very different.