He Did His Duty
Horatio Nelson's two-column charge into the Franco-Spanish line was risky, but it won him the battle—at the cost of his life.

BY WILLIAM E. WELSH
clear blue sky and a light wind from the west-northwest greeted the officers and sailors of the two wooden sailing fleets who eyed each other warily 20 miles from the cliffs of Cape Trafalgar in southern Spain. It was the morning of October 21, 1805. The scattered rainsqualls that swept through the previous night had vanished by sunrise and would not disrupt the historic sea battle that would soon unfold. Despite the calm weather, however, experienced sailors in both fleets knew that the heavy swells the ships rode foretold the approach of a gale within a day.

Two days before, on October 19, the Franco-Spanish Combined Fleet, commanded by Vice Adm. Pierre Charles Jean-Baptiste Sylvestre Villeneuve, had raised anchor and inched its way out of the great harbor of Cadiz. Emperor Napoleon had ordered the fleet to ferry 4,000 soldiers to Naples, to capture any ships or convoys of the Third Coalition it found in the region. The wind was so still that only seven of the 33 ships of the line managed to clear the harbor. It was not until the following day that Villeneuve was able to get his flagship, the 80-gun Bucentaure, and the rest of the fleet into the open ocean. Once under sail, the fleet set a course southeast for the Strait of Gibraltar.

The British squadron responsible for the blockade of Cadiz, under Vice Adm. Horatio Viscount Nelson, stalked its prey closely. By dawn on October 21, Nelson had closed to within nine miles of his adversary. In his place of command aboard the 100-gun flagship Victory, Nelson signaled his 27 ships of the line to form two columns, one behind Victory and the other behind the 100-gun Royal Sovereign, flagship of Vice Adm. Cuthbert Collingwood, and to prepare for battle.

Upon receiving the order, the British crews sprang to action. They tore down the partitions that formed officers' quarters around the aft guns, stowed mess tables and stools, and stuffed hammocks into nettings above the bulwarks to protect those on the upper deck. They also distributed fuses, powder charges and cannonballs to those manning the guns. The French and Spanish gun decks were already cleared for action. Knowing Nelson's reputation as a fighter, Villeneuve had ordered his fleet to prepare for battle as soon as it was at sea.
Nelson stood with Captain Thomas Masterman Hardy on Victory's poop deck. He wore a threadbare frockcoat, embroidered on the left breast with the stars of the four knighthoods that had been bestowed upon him during his lengthy naval career. He had been blinded in his right eye in Corsica in 1794 and had lost his right arm storming Tenerife in the Canary Islands in 1797. He may have been physically handicapped by the wounds, but his mental faculties were as sharp as ever.

Nelson, together with his fellow countrymen, longed for the destruction of the Franco-Spanish fleet. Such a knockout blow, they believed, would put a finish to Napoleon's dream of global domination. To this end, Nelson planned a two-pronged attack that went against conventional tactics, which usually called for two fleets sailing in line opposite each other and trading broadsides. Nelson's ships would keep the weather gauge—that is, stay upwind of the Combined Fleet. When the Combined Fleet was sighted, the British would bear down on it in two columns, with one column punching through the enemy's center and the other column smashing through its rear. As the British ships broke through the Franco-Spanish line, they would engage their enemies from the leeward, or downwind, side. That would separate the main body of the Combined Fleet from its vanguard and allow the British to attain superiority in numbers. The plan, put down on paper October 8 in a document known as the Trafalgar memorandum, was dubbed "The Nelson Touch."

Judging that his fleet would be unable to make it to the Strait of Gibraltar before Nelson fell upon his rear, Villeneuve signaled his ships at 7:30 a.m. to return to Cadiz. By 10 the Combined Fleet had reversed direction and was bracing for the British attack. In an effort to overtake the Combined Fleet before it could regain Cadiz, the British hoisted auxiliary sails.

Nelson would lead the 12 ships of the British weather column, while Collingwood aboard Royal Sovereign would lead the 15 ships that formed the British lee column. Nelson directed Victory to steer toward the 12th ship from the Combined Fleet's front, which turned out to be Bucentaure, and Royal Sovereign, which was positioned a mile and a half off Victory's starboard beam, headed for the 16th ship from the enemy's front. In the final moments before the battle began, Nelson sent a signal to the fleet: "England expects that every man will do his duty." As each captain passed the message along to his crew, it was greeted with cheers.

Nelson's plan was full of risk. As the two British columns bore down on the Combined Fleet, the bows, masts and rigging of lead ships in each column would be exposed to enemy broadsides, with no chance to return fire until they began to pass through gaps in the enemy line. The admirals and captains of the Combined Fleet were confident that they could break up Nelson's attack by dismantling the British ships before they could break through the line. The British had one decisive advantage over the Combined Fleet, however. British gun crews could fire at least two or three times as fast as either the French or Spanish. Thus, if Nelson's bold plan of attack succeeded and the British could isolate parts of the Combined Fleet and outnumber it, then the British gunnery might administer a mortal blow to Napoleon's principal fleet.

As Victory advanced, Nelson realized to his dismay that the Combined Fleet was not in one orderly line as he had expected. Instead, it was in clumps of three or four ships, with no gaps through which his column could pass. Shortly before noon, the 74-gun French Fougueux fired a full broadside from 1,000 yards at Royal Sovereign. Collingwood ordered men on all three decks to lie flat, but the shells fell short, doing no damage. The vice admiral had ordered the ships in his division to follow Royal Sovereign into battle on his starboard side. The ships fanned out and began to advance abreast rather than in column. Royal Sovereign was greeted by broadsides from Fougueux, the 80-gun French Indomitable and the 74-gun Spanish Monarca. Once within range, Royal Sovereign was largely dismasted as it steered toward a gap between the Spanish 112-gun Santa Ana and Fougueux.

Victory received a similar reception. As soon as Nelson's flagship closed to within 1,000 yards, it was fired on by the 74-gun French Héros, Bucentaure and the gigantic 140-gun Spanish Santísima Trinidad. The solid shot toppled Victory's mizen topmast, tore off its studding sails, cut the tiller ropes and broke the ship's wheel. Victory's advance was much slower than Nelson would have liked, but he exercised no control over the capricious winds that were barely blowing. As Nelson and Hardy strode the quarterdeck, a cannonball passed between them. Each man looked at the other to see if his friend had been in-
Nelson had tried with varying degrees of determination to get a French army across the English Channel for an eight-year period between 1797 and 1805. At Boulogne the French emperor managed to assemble about 2,000 boats to carry nearly 112,000 of his best troops across, but the various parts of his fleet were bottled up by blockading British squadrons in the French ports of Brest, Rochefort and Toulon.

Spain had joined France when it declared war on Britain in 1804, and the following month the two continental powers signed a secret treaty whereby King Charles IV agreed to provide Napoleon with between 25 and 29 ships of the line. With the addition of the Spanish ships, the French and Spanish admirals would have larger, more heavily armed ships than their British counterparts. What's more, the French ships were of better design and faster under sail than the British ships. If used properly, they might offset British experience. Anticipating that Nelson would try to cut his line, Villeneuve had formed a 12-ship reserve, which he called a "squadron of observation." If properly led, it might be able to neutralize Nelson's attack by counterattacking the British.

When the French departed Cadiz, the vanguard of their fleet was commanded by Spanish Vice Adm. Ignacio de Alava aboard Santa Ana, the center under Villeneuve aboard Bucentaure, the rear under Rear Adm. Pierre Dumanoir le Pelley aboard the 80-gun Formidable and the squadron of observation under Admiral Federico Gravina aboard the 112-gun Principe de Asturias. When the fleet reversed course, it put Dumanoir's division in the van and should have put Alava's in the rear. Gravina, however, swung into the rear instead of taking up a position windward as Villeneuve had instructed. As the battle unfolded, the Combined Fleet missed two key opportunities. One was that the van under Dumanoir could have fallen upon the British rear, and the other was that Gravina's squadron of observation could have reinforced the Franco-Spanish line either in the center or the rear where the British attacked. Those missed opportunities would cost the Combined Fleet the battle.

As Victory passed astern of Bucentaure, one of the former's gunners pulled the lanyard on a 68-pounder carronade on the forecastle port side, sending a deadly short-range combination of one massive ball and 500 musket balls through Bucentaure's stern and across its deck. That carronade blast was followed by a double-shotted broadside from Victory fired at point-blank range into the French flagship's stern. That crippling first broadside killed or wounded upward of 200 of Bucentaure's crew and dismounted 20 of its guns. The French ship's misery was compounded in the course of the next hour as broadsides from five more British ships shredded its hull and masts.

The French maneuvered in vain to rescue Bucentaure. The 84-gun Neptune fired a broadside that splintered Victory's forecastle and bowsprit, while Captain Jean Jacques Lucas steered the 74-gun Redoutable into position to have his crew board the British man of war. Hardy accepted the challenge and ordered his crew to steer Victory so that its starboard side would come alongside Redoutable's. Victory's bow rammed Redoutable's port bow, and the two ships locked yardarms. In a scene that was to be repeated often throughout the battle, Lucas and his men tried to disable Victory by annihilating the crew that controlled the ship from its upper deck. While Victory's gun crews poured shot into Redoutable, sharpshooters and grenadiers perched in Redoutable's tops fired their muskets at any human target they could spot on Victory's deck.

More ships joined the expanding battle in the center. The 98-gun British Temeraire cut sharply through the enemy line behind Victory. In the process, it took a broadside from Neptune that brought its main topmast crashing down. Despite the damage, Temeraire was able to take up a position opposite Victory on Redoutable's starboard side, from which it began to fire a number of effective broadsides. As the fighting progressed, Temeraire and Redoutable became locked together when their masts fell across each other. The ships gradually drifted leeward until Temeraire crashed into Fougueux, a refugee from the action begun by Royal Sovereign farther down the line. This created the rare spectacle of four ships of line locked together in battle.
An unidentified sharpshooter perched in the mizzen top of Redoutable fired a shot from his musket that struck Nelson in the chest at 1:25 p.m. as he and Hardy walked the quarterdeck. "I hope you're not wounded, my Lord?" Hardy cried.

"They have done for me at last, Hardy," Nelson gasped.

"I hope not!"

"Yes," Nelson said. "My backbone is shot through."

Hardy ordered Nelson carried down to the orlop, the lowest deck, where he would be protected from gunfire.

On the upper decks, the battle seemed to be going Lucas' way as Victory's crew was forced to abandon a dozen 12-pounders on the quarterdeck and retreat below. Lucas organized a boarding party, cut the main yard for a bridge, and prepared to board. Victory had a larger crew than Redoutable, however, and Royal Marines and sailors repulsed the attack. Lucas then tried to board Temeraire, only to fail again. Through repeated broadsides, Temeraire eventually forced both French ships to strike their colors, but Lucas and his crew had inflicted so much damage on Temeraire and Victory that neither ship was able to play a significant role in the second half of the battle.

Although the British seemed most hard pressed at the point where Victory cut through the Franco-Spanish line and Nelson was mortally wounded, that was not the case. The ships of the leeward column, which immediately followed Royal Sovereign through the line, were to suffer the most. Royal Sovereign managed to overpower Santa Ana, but Belleisle and Mars, which followed closely behind it at about 12:15 p.m., were severely handled by their French adversaries, Fougueux and the 74-gun Pluton, respectively.

Santa Ana was pure "Spanish perfection," wrote Collingwood after the battle. "She towered over the Royal Sovereign like a castle." As it passed Santa Ana's stern, Royal Sovereign fired a broadside from its port side into the rear of the Spanish three-decker. The blast wrecked 14 of the ship's guns and killed nearly 100 of its crew. The 74-gun Belleisle followed closely, firing another broadside through Santa Ana's stern. Royal Sovereign then took up a position on Santa Ana's leeward side, and the two remained locked in combat for nearly two hours before the Spanish ship struck its colors.

Belleisle, under the command of Captain William Hargood, was the next to enter close combat. As it sailed through the enemy line, Fougueux struck it amidships. The bowsprit of the French ship made a screeching sound like a wounded animal while it was dragged along Belleisle's quarterdeck. Once locked together, the two ships proceeded to demolish each other with cannon fire. While engaged with Fougueux, Belleisle was subjected to broadsides from a half dozen other enemy ships. Belleisle lost all three masts, while Fougueux lost two before fi-
nally managing to break free. Although it appeared that Belleisle would have to strike its colors, Hargood and his men held on until other British ships distracted their attackers.

The next British ship to join the action, Mars, came under fire from both Santa Ana and Pluton. Mars traded broadsides with Pluton for about 20 minutes. The latter got the upper hand, ending up on Mars' starboard quarter, from where it pounded the British ship unmercifully. About that time, Fougueux also turned its attention to Mars. Now under fire from three ships, Mars was in a tight spot. While trying to pinpoint the positions of the enemy ships from the quarterdeck, its captain was decapitated by a cannonball fired from Fougueux.

The arrival of the 80-gun British Tonnant at about 1 p.m. turned the tide in favor of the British. First Tonnant silenced Monarca with a several effective broadsides. Next it turned its attention to Algésiras, the 74-gun flagship of French Rear Adm. Charles Magon. Like Redoutable's Captain Lucas, Magon also believed boarding was the way to capture an enemy vessel. While Tonnant was firing double shot at the French ship, Algésiras collided with it amidships. Immediately Tonnant's car-

Theodor Weber's depiction of The Sinking of Admiral Villeneuve's Flagship was a bit premature. Bucentaure's crew retook it amid a storm after the battle, but it subsequently ran aground.

Anatomy of a Wooden Battle Fleet

The wooden sailing ships of the three nations—Britain, France and Spain—that fought at Trafalgar were formidable fighting machines that the Europeans had perfected over the 2½ centuries preceding that battle. By the beginning of the 18th century, all major European navies had implemented standardized methods of production for these full-rigged ships. This allowed them to be constructed with common architectural features for their hulls, structures and sail patterns within the different rates and classes.

Naval ships were grouped into six major categories, known as rates. Ships of the first three rates were referred to as "above the line," while ships of the last three rates were referred to as "below the line." Ships above the line formed what was known as a battle fleet. A first rate ship generally mounted 100 to 120 guns, a second rate ship 90 to 98 and a third rate 64 to 84 guns. Ships with 84 to 120 guns required three decks to deploy their guns, while ships with 64, 74 or 80 guns required two. These were referred to as three deckers or two deckers, respectively.

Ships below the line included fourth rates with 50 to 60 guns, fifth rates with 32 to 44 guns and sixth rates with 20 to 28 guns. While fourth and fifth rates were two-deckers, sixth rates mounted all of their guns on the main deck and thus required no gunports from which to fire.

Fifth and sixth rate ships were known as frigates and were built according to a streamlined design introduced by the French. In a large battle, frigates served as scouts, passed signals back and forth among ships and guarded any ship that had surrendered by striking its flag.

At the time of Trafalgar, European navies used smooth-bore muzzleloading cannons firing solid shot to pierce the hulls of enemy ships or bring down their masts. A first-rate ship of the line at Trafalgar mounted 32-pounders on the bottom deck, 24-pounders on the middle deck and 12-pounders on the upper deck. Solid shot fired from these guns could clear the decks of enemy ships, dismount enemy guns from their carriages and send thousands of wooden splinters flying through the air to kill or maim crew members. One well-executed broadside from a ship of the line was capable of destroying the offensive capability of an enemy ship and leaving it open to boarding and capture. The big guns had a maximum range of 3,000 yards, but naval commanders at the time of Trafalgar preferred to fight at 350 yards or less.

The 33 ships of the Franco-Spanish Combined Fleet mounted about 500 more guns than the 27 British ships at Trafalgar, but that numerical advantage was more than offset by superior British gunnery. For example, it took British gun crews only 90 seconds to reload and fire a 32-pounder, whereas it took Spanish crews about five minutes to perform the same task.

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given an hour later, at about 1 p.m. Dumanoir had seven ships at the outset of the engagement, while the second was the main body of the fleet. The first signal was made shortly after two signals from Villeneuve to come to the assistance of the van around in the opening stage of the battle. He ignored the Combined Fleets vanguard when Nelson struck, had turned his ships to turn around. The 74-gun French Intrepide and 74-gun Spanish San Augustin were the only two ships to head for the thick of the battle, trying to assist Bucintore and Santisima Trinidad, respectively. Hardy, aboard Victory, spotted the movement and signaled for all available British ships to meet the threat. As it bore down on Bucintore, Intrepid was shredded by cannon fire from seven ships of the line that had responded to Hardy's signal. Intrepide, however, did not easily succumb to the British gunnery. Under the skilful command of Captain Edward Codrington, Orion took up a position on Intrepid's starboard quarter from where his ship could inflict heavy damage and avoid return fire. After a two-hour fight, Intrepide struck its colors at 5:30 p.m.

San Augustin met a similar fate. Its advance was checked by the 74-gun British Leviathan under Captain Henry Bayntun. When the two ships became entangled, Bayntun ordered Leviathan's carronades to sweep the Spanish ship's upper deck to prepare it for boarding. On the third try, Leviathan's crew managed to board and capture the Spanish ship.

The battle was drawing to a close as Nelson breathed his last. Franco-Spanish ships not already captured by the British either surrendered or managed to escape to the north or south. Bucintore struck its colors around 4:30 p.m., and Santisima Trinidad did the same a few minutes later. Although mortally wounded, Gravina led 11 ships to Cadiz, while Dumanoir led four ships south. A total of 17 ships, eight French and nine Spanish, surrendered to the British. The explosion of the French 74-gun Achille, which had caught fire, marked the end of hostilities at 5:30 p.m.

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Assuming command of the British fleet upon Nelson's death, Collingwood ordered the prizes taken into tow and the fleet to sail for Gibraltar. The following day a terrific storm with gale-force winds that would last six days engulfed the fleet. Collingwood signaled the fleet to destroy or disable the ships under tow and concentrate on saving the ships with masts. The captured ships were either sunk, burned or run aground. The British ships that survived the battle intact all arrived safely in Gibraltar.

British casualties in the Battle of Trafalgar totaled about 450 men killed and about 1,240 wounded, while the French suffered about 3,650 killed and wounded and the Spanish 2,000 killed and wounded. Nelson was not the only flag officer among the casualties—half of the admirals in the Combined Fleet were either killed outright or later died of battle wounds. Alava, Gravina and Magon died, while Dumanoir and Villeneuve survived.

It is said that Nelson and nature destroyed Napoleon's fleet. The storm following the battle served as a metaphor for the emperor's ruined ambitions. Napoleon's dreams of invading Britain and controlling the high seas were shattered by British naval fire during the battle and by the treacherous shoals of Cape Trafalgar thereafter.

Preserved in a cask of brandy, Nelson's body was taken home to England, where he was buried with full honors in a coffin made from the wood of Orient, a French ship of the line destroyed in an earlier key Nelson victory, the Battle of the Nile. Villeneuve was held as a prisoner of war by the British for six months. He died under suspicious circumstances shortly after his return to France in 1806. Napoleon claimed he committed suicide to avoid court-martial, but the half-dozen knife wounds in his body made it more likely that Napoleon had arranged his "suicide" as retribution for his failure to defeat the British. MH

William E. Welsh writes from Vienna, Va., and as further reading recommends: The Battle of Trafalgar, by Geoffrey Bennett; The Enemy at Trafalgar, by Edward Fraser; Trafalgar: The Nelson Touch, by David Howarth; and Trafalgar: Countdown to Battle 1803-1805, by Alan Schom.