Trafalgar: A SIGNAL VICTORY

On the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, Roy Adkins discusses the geo-political significance of the historic victory and reveals how its outcome was decided by Nelson’s superior command of maritime communications.
In the wild October night-time,
when the wind raved round the land,
And the Back-sea met the Front-sea,
and our doors were blocked with sand,
And we heard the drub of Dead-man's Hay,
where bones of thousands are,
We knew not what the day had done
for us at Trafalgar.

From The Dynasts by Thomas Hardy

Napoleon seized power in France during the turbulent aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, and it wasn’t long before he set about promulgating its principles. On the Continent, he gradually began subduing neighbouring states, either by conquest or by forming alliances; Spain, fearful of a French invasion, became a reluctant ally. However, during the years that followed, Napoleon’s motives changed to a more straightforward accumulation of territory, and by 1805, he had become intent on dominating all of Europe. However, one obstacle still stood in his way: Britain and, in particular, her navy.

As an island, Britain wasn’t as easily conquered as other European states. Before Napoleon could contemplate an invasion, it was crucial to subdue her navy, which already had a grip on the world’s sea lanes and was beginning to monopolise world trade. Napoleon realised that ultimate power lay not in direct control over mainland Europe but in the international trade that was making Britain a wealthy nation, while the economy of France was starting to fail.

Before 1805, Napoleon had already been forced to abandon several plans for an invasion of Britain: although he was a military genius on land, he had underestimated the problems of naval warfare. The situation finally came to a head at Cape Trafalgar on Spain’s southwest coast on 21 October 1805, when 27 British battleships under the command of Admiral Nelson famously overcame 18 French and 15 Spanish ships.

The significance of the British victory can't be overestimated: with success at Trafalgar, Napoleon may have achieved the naval supremacy that would have allowed him to develop a worldwide French Empire at the expense of the British. However, the victory was so conclusive that the French and Spanish navies never fully recovered from the battle. By preventing an invasion of Britain and maintaining British naval supremacy in the seas surrounding Europe, the battle set the seal on the continuing growth of the British Empire.

One of the main reasons the British scored such a decisive victory despite being outnumbered was their greater understanding of the difficulties of communication, and the steps they took to counter these problems.

At a time when journalists bring us news of battles as they’re taking place, it’s difficult to comprehend just how slow communication was in the early 19th century. On land, news travelled as fast as a galloping horse. Communication at sea seldom reached this speed, mainly because it was difficult to find a ship and deliver messages. At the same time, maritime communications were also at the mercy of the weather. Word from Jamaica, then, might take two months to reach London, and from India, six.

Napoleon's mistake in developing his naval tactics lay in his ignoring the vagaries of contacting fleets at sea, where dispatches had to be carried by relatively small, lightly armed ships that relied
upon speed and manoeuvrability to elude capture rather than firepower. He repeatedly failed to grasp the fact that close central control of naval operations was impossible. And because he distrusted his admirals, he issued increasingly detailed and rigid sets of orders, resulting in confusion and hesitation, since his admirals knew orders might be countermanded before they could be carried out.

By the beginning of 1805, Napoleon had amassed a huge invasion army and transport ships to ferry his soldiers. However, he didn’t have a large enough fleet to protect the transports from attack; his warships were confined to various ports by a tight British blockade. So he devised a plan that aimed to provide the French with an opportunity to combine several fleets of warships into a force strong enough to break the British Navy’s stranglehold on the English Channel.

A fleet led by Vice-Admiral Ganteaume from Brest in northwestern France would sail undetected to Martinique in the West Indies to cause confusion within the British fleet and to lure blockading ships off their stations in search of it. Vice-Admiral Villeneuve would then take another fleet from Toulon in southern France, collect Spanish warships from Cadiz and join Ganteaume at Martinique. This force would attack British possessions in the West Indies, thereby drawing British ships from Europe to deal with the menace. The French would then turn back and take control of the Channel, allowing the invasion of Britain to begin.

The success of this strategy relied upon
Napoleon’s scheme had failed. Any likely French moves. At that point, the Admiralty adapted its strategy to counter the slowness of communications, the chain of seven ships stretched to Nelson’s horizon. On 19 October, the ship nearest to Cadiz spotted the French and Spanish ships leaving port and sent a message to Nelson. The signal was transmitted by hoisting a selection of flags of different patterns and colours, which was seen and repeated by another British ship farther out to sea. In all, a chain of seven ships stretched to Nelson’s fleet 80 kilometres away, and passing the message took nearly two hours.

Nelson missed Villeneuve in the West Indies, and on reaching Europe in late July, he returned to England on leave. In fog off the west coast of Spain, Villeneuve ran into a British squadron, but managed to slip away after an indecisive battle. Eventually, he took shelter in Cadiz, blockaded by the British once more.

When Nelson learned where Villeneuve was, he sailed from England to take command of the blockading fleet. On his arrival, Nelson immediately changed the dispositions of the ships to tempt Villeneuve to leave. Instead of having the majority of his fleet visible from the shore, he positioned only a few small scout ships close in, while he himself waited with the main fleet below the horizon. On 19 October, the ship nearest to Cadiz spotted the French and Spanish ships leaving port and sent a message to Nelson. The signal was transmitted by hoisting a selection of flags of different patterns and colours, which was seen and repeated by another British ship farther out to sea. In all, a chain of seven ships stretched to Nelson’s fleet 80 kilometres away, and passing the message took nearly two hours.

Thus, if Nelson had then sent a message asking for more details, it would take around four hours to receive an answer. Instead, he was forced to make a decision on the available information. Assuming the French would head straight for the Mediterranean, he gave orders for the fleet to sail in that direction. This was undoubtedly a gamble: if he was wrong, the enemy might escape him, as they had a few months earlier. However, this time he was right, and the Battle of Trafalgar was fought two days later. And here, too, the problems of communication directly influenced Nelson’s tactics.

Nelson knew about the difficulties of reading flag signals obscured by clouds of gunsmoke or flags shot away during the fighting. During the battle of Copenhagen four years earlier, he had used such circumstances to his advantage, when he deliberately ignored a signal from his commanding officer to withdraw before the battle was won. Putting a telescope to his blind eye, he said, “I have a right to be blind sometimes. I really do not see the signal” (thereby providing the origin of the saying ‘to turn a blind eye’). His memorandum before...
Admiralty building in Whitehall, and similar telegraphs connected the Admiralty with Portsmouth and Chatham in Kent. They consisted of chains of semaphore stations set up on hilltops, each within sight of the next one, so that a message coded into semaphore signals could be repeated, station to station, from one end of the chain to the other. Good visibility was essential: poor weather or darkness prevented messages being transmitted.

The telegraphs were supplemented by smaller chains of signal posts that used a much simpler system – a white flag, meaning “all is well”, a red flag for an alarm – as well as chains of beacon fires that would blaze from hilltops to warn of invasion. Many beacons stood on hills that were already known as Beacon Hill, having been used in earlier signal chains, but many Telegraph Hill place names date to around the time of Trafalgar.

After the battle, communications improved significantly. At sea, the impact of steam power soon made its mark. With ships no longer at the mercy of the wind, most journeys took less time, and postal services became less erratic. On land, faster and more reliable communications developed with the spread of electric telegraph systems using Morse code to transmit messages electrically along telegraph lines. This type of telegraph no longer relied on good weather and could also operate at night. By the mid-19th century, the electric telegraph had almost completely replaced all earlier forms, but it would be another 50 years before the development of radio ushered in the modern era of instant communication.
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