

Royal Navy Club of 1765 and 1785 – Thursday 10 October 2103

Trafalgar Dinner President's Speech

Brother officers, may I begin by thanking on all our behalves the catering staff of Cooke and Butler under their Managing Director, Mark Grove, and their Head Chef, Jean Deillon. May I also thank the excellent staff of the Stationers' Company under their Commercial Manager, Susana de Sousa, Hall Manager Carl Gilbert (a former Warrant Officer of the Royal Horse Artillery), and his Deputy Paul Aouati. The Maitre D' this evening was Sandra Preciado, and I hope you will agree that we have been extremely well looked after by the whole team this evening. Finally, our warm thanks go to the Master and Wardens of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers for the use of their magnificent Hall for our dinner.

Some of you will possibly appreciate the degree to which I am delighted to be here this evening. Or indeed to be anywhere, for that matter. It's been quite an interesting summer. Which reminds me what a strange month this month of October is. For the average naval officer, it brings the most reliable annual prospect of a thumping good mess dinner. For the average senior naval officer, it triggers every possible strategy for trying to avoid yet another after-dinner speaking engagement. And for the really devoted cricket fan, October is of course when you realise that your wife left you in May.

So...Trafalgar, and Vice Admiral Lord Nelson. Acknowledging the significance of the occasion, the heroic greatness of the man, and of course the lustre of this audience, it's never going to be easy to approach this subject in an entirely original way. But now that I'm immersed in the perspectives of the merchant marine, there may perhaps be a different angle there. Nelson himself, of course, had a year at sea in a merchantman in his very early career – the West Indies trader *Mary Ann* - of which he remarked: *'if I did not improve in my education, I returned a practical seaman, with a horror of the Royal Navy, and with a saying then constant with the [merchant] seamen, "Aft the most honour, forward the better man!"* And there is evidence that this particular insight very much influenced Nelson's still evolving personal style of leadership.

I'm not sure how Nelson himself would have viewed the activities of my own organisation today – the Maritime & Coastguard Agency - the national regulator and the UK's safety authority for ships and seafarers. Nelson once admitted, quote: *'My disposition can't bear tame and slow measures'* unquote.

Which doesn't bode well for the view he might have taken of the bureaucracy over which I have the pleasure to preside right now. Slick and admirable though it has suddenly now become.

Still, Nelson might yet have approved of some of the things my Agency strives to promote and achieve. For example, his – or at least Captain Hardy's - manoeuvre at Trafalgar to bring the *Victory* under the stern of the French flagship *Bucentaure* displayed a textbook adherence to today's international regulations for the prevention of collisions at sea. Unfortunately the subsequent bumping alongside the *Redoubtable* frankly didn't. And *Victory's* 50-gun broadside through Admiral Villeneuve's stern cabin windows at very short range was perhaps hardly the stuff of seafaring camaraderie and courtesy.

Second though, and more seriously, the 'humanity' that Nelson prayed for in the event of an English victory was borne out in a manner that exactly met the letter and spirit of today's Safety of Life at Sea Convention. By this I mean the humane and indeed courageous and rescuing of friend and foe alike from shipwrecks of all nations, in the violent storm off Cape Trafalgar that followed hard on the heels of the battle itself.

And, third, as it happens just this year the UK has ratified the Maritime Labour Convention, an international law which at last codifies the principles of decency in seafarers' living conditions and general welfare. Principles that Nelson himself intuitively practiced more than 200 years ago, in the careful attention that we are told that he always paid to the well-being of his men. We recall, for example, some of his acts of enlightened management in ensuring that sailors got their pay and pensions, and were given every opportunity to send and receive their personal mail. And we also note that when Nelson was Commander in Chief in the Mediterranean, no more than half of one percent of his crews were laid low with sickness at any one time. For a Type 45 today, that would mean just 1 person in sick bay at any time – you're all thinking, probably a pusser or a greenie of course. This degree of seagoing health of was, of course, quite remarkable for that age, and would certainly more than tick many of our new regulatory boxes.

But enough of tenuous analogies. Inevitably, one has to come back to what Trafalgar meant then and still means now in strategic terms; and back to what Nelson the officer continues to signify for a Royal Navy, two centuries and more down the road.

First off, we should perhaps ask: was it actually such an important battle? Well, we gathered here tonight might tend naturally to think – yes, of course. Yet many others today, including perhaps some of our French and Spanish colleagues, might view Trafalgar as just one more skirmish of many that happened in that epoch between long-standing maritime rivals and enemies.

But actually, what we can reasonably conclude, in the light of history, is that Nelson's victory at Trafalgar decisively undermined Napoleon's strategic capacity for military adventure; it helped to shape the Western world's geopolitical landscape in the 19th and 20th centuries; it established British naval dominance around the globe – give or take the odd challenge – for the next hundred years or so; and it enabled the dramatic burgeoning of British trade, the expansion of Empire and the flourishing of the Industrial Revolution at home. So, reasonably significant stuff, to say the least.

As to the man, Nelson was killed on 21 October 1805 at the very peak of his achievements, the apex of his reputation and the hyperbolic apogee of his own self-image. The world has of course seen many great military heroes, but very few seem to have captured quite such international reverence and affection, or quite such widespread affirmation of his undoubted qualities of courage, dash, humanity and leadership. As an aside, having observed 'leadership' in non-military circles for just a few years now, I would say it happens there much more in garbled theory than in honourable practice. And we should hang on very jealously to what we know of it.

Yet Nelson was a complex and in many ways flawed man. (Though good enough to be a member of this Club, mark you...) *'In many points a really great man'*, remarked Lord Minto, *'(but)... in others a baby'*. Or, as the Governor of Malta declared: *'he was constitutionally irritable and uneven'*...Though the Governor went on to concede: *'...yet never was a commander so enthusiastically loved by men of all ranks, from the captain of the fleet to the youngest ship-boy'*.

Ruthless in battle, yet remarkably sensitive and emotional in private and amongst his men; statesmanlike, measured and impressive in the right company; yet frequently erratic, pompous and vain elsewhere.

But for all that, Nelson seems invariably to have inspired his captains and his crews to such an extent that they always seemed able – in the argot of today's public service – to deliver high-quality outcomes. He led from the front; he took well-measured risks; he stood his ground with great physical and moral courage; he never flinched from peril; he had the humility to trust his subordinates and to share his loyalty and affection for them openly.

And finally – and perhaps this still matters more than it perhaps should – he had the habit of winning; of achieving great success; and of earning conspicuous reward. Not everything about Nelson was unequivocally admirable; but he gave us plenty enough clues about how to lead, motivate and inspire people, in ways that would work even in today’s Navy: more modern, yes; more nuanced in its roles; more automated; yet no less critically dependent for its success on basic human factors: from towering individual achievements on the one hand to prosaic, lumpen fallibilities on the other. Nelson somehow contrived to get the very best from his ships and his people, in many difficult circumstances. It would be careless, if not negligent, to ignore the lessons he offered us in that domain.

And so, Brother Officers and Guests, may I ask you to make a toast, in silence, to ‘*The Immortal Memory of Admiral Lord Nelson, and all who fell with him.*’