NUOVA ANTOLOGIA MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 4
2023

Fascicolo 15. Giugno 2023

Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
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Società Italiana di Storia Militare

Nuova Antologia Militare
Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020

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Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 978-88-9295-712-1

Nelson and the Naval Crisis of the 1790s

by Jeremy Black

'So now my brave countrymen be not in fear of an invasion for the Lord will prosper your island.' John Jup, an ordinary seaman serving on the Orion was in no doubt that God was behind Nelson's victory at the Nile, one in which the explosion of *L'Orient* 'made a whole element shake and was a most glorious scene.' Egypt was a new sphere for British naval power, but Horatio Nelson was able on 1 August 1798 to win a spectacular victory that indicated the possibility of total victory at sea. While Nelson was driven away by a strong northerly gale, the Toulon fleet had left for Egypt on 19 May, taking Napoleon and his army to fulfil plans for the general's aggrandizement. A long and unsuccessful search was finally ended when Nelson found the French fleet anchored in Aboukir Bay. As with the British victory at La Hougue in 1692 and that of the Russians over the Turks at Cesmé in 1770, an attacked fleet in an inshore position was especially vulnerable.

Nelson unexpectedly attacked the French on both sides: on the shallow inshore side of their line, where the French were not prepared to resist, as well as simultaneously on the other side. This manoeuvre was not without risks. Culloden ran aground and was unable to take part. In a battle fought at night, without reliance on the signal book, but instead with reliance on a decentralized method of command and control that Nelson felt would help him release merited Providential support, in which the British fired at very close range, the French lost 11 of their 13 ships of the line present; the other two fled, as did the frigates. The nature of the French position was such that Nelson was able to achieve a battle of annihilation, first defeating the ships in the French van and then pressing on to attack those moored behind; the latter had been unable to provide assistance. Nelson had ably prepared his captains to act vigorously and in co-operation in all possible eventualities, and had fully explained his tactics to them. British se-

NAM, Anno 4 – n. 15
DOI: 10.36158/978889295712118
Giugno 2023

amanship was superior and the well-drilled gun crews outshot the French who were not only surprised and poorly deployed, but also failed to respond adequately to the British attack.

The Battle of the Nile was the most dramatic of the naval struggles in the French Revolutionary War, indeed a victory that, albeit on a smaller scale, was more complete than Trafalgar, the most dramatic of the battles in the Napoleonic War. Although Napoleon's army had been already landed, the victory in 1798 was also important in that it was the culminating naval success in recovering from a serious crisis in 1795-7, one that had brought to a head the difficulties in winning naval supremacy against a background of a radically deteriorating position on the Continent. Opposing fleets were repeatedly shown in 1797-8 to lack the fighting quality and organizational strength of the British navy, although there was nothing inevitable in their defeat. Yet, the example of the naval crises of 1778-81 was to the fore in the 1790s and, indeed until Trafalgar

As relations with France had deteriorated in the winter of 1792-3, the British government had anxiously sought reports on French naval preparations, while, at the same time, considering how best to use British naval power. On 27 December 1792, when the two powers were still at peace, the Cabinet decided to send warships to Flushing in order to help the threatened Dutch against any French attack on their territory or ships. However, intervention further afield faced difficulties. In particular, Britain only had a small squadron in Italian waters and that was outnumbered by a French fleet which successfully put pressure on Italian states. Separately, the naval situation was to the fore in what was the last British government attempt to keep the peace, with Britain promising not to commit hostilities while hopes of peace remained:

> 'unless such measures should be adopted on the part of France in the interval as would leave His Majesty no alternative. Among these must unquestionably be reckoned the plan said to be now in agitation in France, of sending immediately to the West Indies a squadron of ships of war, some of them of great force, together with a very considerable body of land forces. Even in time of the most profound peace, and with the utmost confidence that could be entertained in the good dispositions of France, such a measure would place His Majesty's colonies in that quarter in a situation of the greatest uneasiness. In the present moment … it is impossible that he should forego the advantage of his naval superiority in these seas, and suffer a large force to proceed on a destination eventually so injurious to the security of his own dominions, and to the property and interests of his subjects.'

The Delegates in Council, or beggars on horseback, cartoon of the delegation of sailors who devised the terms of settlement of the Mutiny of Spithead, 1797. scanned from *Vaisseau de Ligne*, Time Life, 1979. Wikimedia Commons.

In the event, the declaration of war was not followed by fleet engagements in 1793, in part because the French fleet was unprepared, while the policy of open, rather than close, blockade limited British opportunities for combat. At any rate, the leadership and administration of the French fleet was badly affected by the collapse of royal authority in the French Revolution and the resulting political and administrative disruption. Aside from a breakdown in relations between officers and men, there was factionalism within the officer corps and the contrary demands of politicians in Paris and the ports. Disaffection within the French navy proved more serious than its British counterpart during the naval mutinies of 1797. In 1793, the British were invited into Toulon by French Royalists, before being driven out again by Revolutionary forces benefiting from the well-sited cannon of Napoleon, then a young artillery officer. France lost 13 ships of the line as a result

of the rising in Toulon. France was in a particularly vulnerable situation not only due to acute internal instability, but also because Spain was an opponent from 1793 to 1795. British ministers used their naval strength to pursue a policy of Caribbean gains which was seen as a way to weaken French finances, trade, and ability to sustain naval power. The issues of campaigning there helped make this very difficult. In 1794, the British, whose fleet had been greatly strengthened over the previous decade, got their opportunity. At the Glorious First of June, Richard, Earl Howe with 25 ships of the line attacked a French fleet of 26 of the line under Louis Thomas Villaret-Joyeuse sent to escort a grain convoy from America into Brest. Howe, who had gained the weather gauge as a result of skillful seamanship, was unable fully to execute his plan for all his ships to cut the French line, so that each passed under the stern of a French ship and engaged it from leeward, but, with fleet seamanship operating effectively, sufficient ships succeeded and British gunnery was superior enough and at close range for long enough to cost the French seven warships (six captured and one sunk) and 5,000 casualties, crucial given the difficulties of obtaining skilled manpower. The French fleet was affected by the revolutionary churn, which left captains inexperienced and in some cases insubordinate, while there was no practice in acting like a fleet.

Success indicated the broad-based nature of command ability on the eve of Nelson's triumphs. George III had hastened to Portsmouth to congratulate his commanders, giving Howe a diamond-hilted sword on the deck of the Queen Charlotte and presenting the admirals involved with gold medals. The Glorious First of June saw the superior force win as a result of its skill, experience and tactical skill, but the damage to the British ships in breaking through the French line, followed by the French ability to reform their fleet, ensured that the exploitation was limited. Conversely, the Brest fleet thereafter tended to avoid the risk of battle, although that winter the fleet went to sea to attack British commerce and to stop British support for the Vendée rebels.

Service at The Glorious First of June was used by Admiral Sir Allan Gardner in his successful contest for a parliamentary seat for Westminster in 1796. Whereas in the first four years in the Anglo-French stage of the War of American Independence France had only lost four ships of the line, in the first three years of the new war France lost 33 of the line, and, aside from providing the British with additions for their fleet, these losses affected the number of sailors available. The pressure on its navy was intense.

However, the vital convoy reached France in 1794. Moreover, the victory did not affect the conflict in the Low Countries where the war very much went France's way. So also with British naval success over the French in 1795, off the Ile de Groix (23 June) and the Ile de Hyères (13 July). In the former, a larger British fleet hit the French Brest fleet in its mismanaged fighting retreat and the three slowest French ships-of-the-line were captured. The Brest fleet had suffered from detaching its six fastest ships to the Toulon fleet. In the latter, the French were outnumbered by 23 to 17 warships, but the French only lost one warship in an engagement that infuriated Nelson. The caution of Vice-Admiral William Hotham led to a failure to push home the British advantage, but was in part justified by the limited support facilities Britain then had in the Mediterranean. He and Nelson had notions of duty in command that differed, just as with Nelson and Calder in 1805. The need for battle and initiative was a given but within strategic, operational and tactical contexts that varied in the implications drawn from them. Formal doctrine did not exist to bridge the divide, which was just as well as it could not have done so given the multiple uncertainties of naval conflict, not least the unpredictability of opposing moves.

Successes were of little value compared to the collapse of the anti-French alliance as France overran the United Provinces in 1795 and pushed Spain first to peace (1795) and then into alliance (1796). The potential loss of the Dutch to France was the key factor that had led Britain to act in 1787 and 1793, and from 1795 it forced Britain to act against the Dutch fleet and Dutch colonies.

War with Spain provided the British with the opportunity to cut Spain's colonial links, there was now the need to blockade Spanish ports and a threat that Britain's opponents, who combined enjoyed a numerical superiority, would be able to cover an invasion. As a result, the British, prioritizing anew, withdrew their navy from the Mediterranean in early 1797, instead using Lisbon as their base. In consequence, the British garrisons on Corsica and Elba were withdrawn and the British could not mount a response when the French seized Venice's navy and its bases in the Ionian Islands, notably Corfu. Moreover, affected by long service, the fleet was now increasingly in a poor position, which greatly increased the pressure on the dockyards. It was scarcely surprising that Britain sought peace, albeit unsuccessfully.

In addition, the French were able to land some troops in Wales in 1797, and to threaten to land more in Ireland, although, having failed earlier, storms blocking

a landing in Bantry Bay in December 1796, that did not occur until 1798. There were also the issues posed by serious mutinies in the British fleet in 1797. These occurred against a background of lengthy and arduous service, and of the acute need for manning that had led to the Quota Acts of 1795 and 1796 and the Navy Act of 1795, which were intended to co-opt local government into the recruitment process. The mutiny initially was a mass protest in April about conditions, especially a failure to raise wages (since 1652) in the face of inflation, the lessening of leave as a result of the coppering of ships, the operation of the bounty system, food supply and the treatment of the injured; and there was scant violence in what were essentially conservative affairs aiming, like popular riots throughout the century, to restore a supposedly just system that had formerly existed. The more frequent transfer of sailors in the 1790s may have harmed relations between captains and men. The mutineers were ready to sail if the French left Brest, and emphasized their loyalty, which helped reduce tension. George III wanted 'any neglect that may have given reason' for discontent remedied, but was also keen on the enforcement of 'due subordination,' and was worried:

> 'The spirit seems to be of a most dangerous kind, as at the same time that the mutiny is conducted with a degree of coolness it is not void of method; how this could break out at once without any suspicion before arising seems unaccountable … it must require a cruise and much time before any reliance can be placed on a restoration of discipline.'

The original mutiny ended when many of the demands were accepted and a royal pardon was granted, but, in May, there were renewed disturbances reflecting the failure to fulfil governmental promises, George noting the unfortunate consequences of Parliament's delay in increasingly naval pay. Vice-Admiral John Colpoys mishandled the situation on London sealing the crew below decks, refusing to talk with them, and then ordering the marines and officers to shoot on sailors climbing out through the hatches. He was then obliged to surrender. The episode led to the verse:

> 'The murdering Colpoys, Vice-Admiral of the Blue,
> Gave order to fire on the London's crew.'

Once again, the mutiny ended when the mutineers' complaints were met, but there was then another mutiny, on the ships in the Nore anchorage off Sheerness who were masking the Dutch, had collapsed by 13 June, and more extensive demands there. Dissatisfaction over conditions provided a fertile basis for political discontent. The Board of Admiralty was opposed to further concessions, and the

supply of fresh water to the ships was stopped, while, as the mutiny became more extreme, it lost support and collapsed in early June. There was also trouble in the British fleet off Cadiz. French and Irish nationalist agents played a smaller role in the mutinies than the government, faced by the anxieties of a revolutionary age, believed, although they were to be more apparent in 1798.

Later mutinies were on a smaller scale and more specific in their grievances. Thus, a conditional nature of naval service was suggested by the unpopularity of the brutal and unpredictable Captain Hugh Pigot of the *Hermione* which led to a mutiny and the killing of Pigot and nine other officers in September 1797. Encouraged by George who was concerned about 'the discipline of the navy,' much effort was devoted to trying to hunt down the mutineers. In December 1801, the crew of some of the ships ordered to sail for the Caribbean mutinied. The mutiny was crushed and the ringleaders executed.

More positively, about four-fifth of sailors were volunteers, the food provided (as in the later world wars) was plentiful and of reasonably high quality, and efforts were made to limit sickness, which made it easier to maintain missions including blockades. During the War of American Independence, Rodney had taken great care of the health of his fleet in the Caribbean, supporting the efforts of the fleet's doctor, Gilbert Blane, who emphasized the use of fresh fruit to deal with scurvy and the importance of sanitation. The routine use of lemon juice from 1796 ensured that deaths due to scurvy fell dramatically. In addition, paternalism was a factor and George could praise the 'humanity' of naval officers.

However much inherently unfair and affected by irregularities, the distribution of prize money helped maintain morale. In 1793-1815, the yield averaged £1 million per annum, a formidable sum that provided an attraction, including, to blockading, and underlined the disadvantages of peace. The set division ranged from an eighth for the commander-in-chief, bringing great wealth for example to Admiral Lord Keith, and quarter for the captain, to a quarter for the seamen and marines combined, but in 1808 the share of the first two fell to one-twelfth and one-sixth, while that of petty officers and able seamen improved. Moreover, most officers were careful of their crew, necessarily so, respecting their professionalism and feeling committed toward them. This was particularly shown among the growing number of officers who were Evangelicals, but was also the case with most. There was a move to regularize punishment, which helped make it less

arbitrary. 'Starting' or pursuing men to their work with a cane or rope's end was prohibited by the Admiralty in 1809 while the punishment returns that followed two years later were designed to rein in harsh captains. Flogging was regarded as necessary but not to be used without due cause. Promotion, especially to petty and warrant officers, was another way to maintain morale, as was a growing willingness to provide leave for the lack of that was a major grievance and cause of desertion.

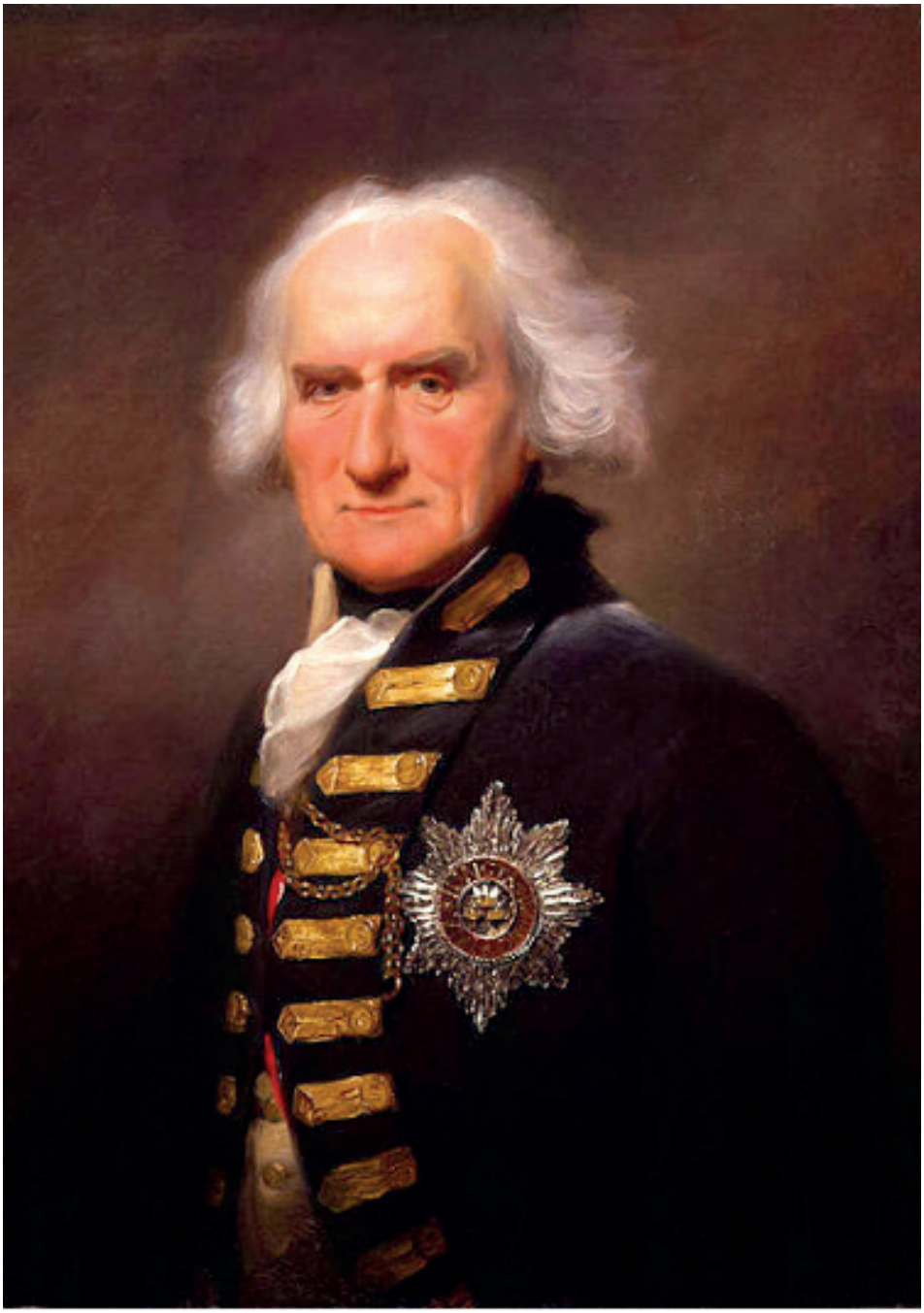
George III also took an approach that reflected his social values and the prevalence of patronage, but a patronage in which merit played a major role. That offered a way to address tensions between social and official rank. Thus, after the capture of a French frigate in 1795, George applauded the promotion of the Captain and the First Lieutenant, adding:

> 'as the Second Lieutenant, Mr Maitland, conducted himself very well, I trust he will soon meet with the same favour, being a man of good family will I hope also be of advantage in the consideration, as it is certainly wise as much as possible to give encouragement if they personally deserve it to gentlemen.'

Frederick Maitland, the grandson of an earl, was indeed a brave officer and was to have a distinguished naval career, including being Napoleon's captor in 1815. Throughout, and for officers an seamen at all ranks, there was danger, in war and peace, and in port and at sea. Thus, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* of 3 July 1790 recorded of the *Saturn*, preparing at Spithead:

> 'The sailors, by accident, let a boom slip from the maintop, which struck Mr Chalmers, the Second Lieutenant, on the head, and knocked him overboard, so that he never rose again. It is supposed the blow killed him. He was a good man, and an able officer.'

Ill-discipline was a particular issue in 1797 due to the crisis of British naval power and the threat to Ireland. George felt it necessary to affirm his 'confidence in naval skill and British valour to supply want of numbers. I am too true an Englishman to have ever adopted the more modern and ignoble mode of expecting equal numbers on all occasions.' In the event, battles enabled the British to transform the situation in 1797. On 14 February off Cape St Vincent, Rear-Admiral Sir John Jervis and 15 of the line attacked a superior and far more heavily-gunned Spanish fleet of 27 of the line under Don José de Cordova, using tactics similar to those of Napoleon on land, to operate on interior lines and concentrate his strength on attacking one section of the Spanish fleet. On his own initiative, and



Vice Admiral John Griffith Colpoys (1742-1821), Unknown author. Wikimedia

copied by others, Nelson kept the two sections separated, while British warships took advantage of the melee Nelson created and of their superior rate of fire to win a number of individual ship encounters. The Spaniards lost four ships of the line captured, including two 112-gunners, and had ten more ships badly damaged. Their fleet fell back into Cadiz, ending the plan for them to repeat 1779 and join the French at Brest. British skill thus helped exploit the difficulties in achieving co-operation and co-ordination between the French, Dutch and Spanish fleets, and self-confidence increased.

Nelson very much looked to the example of action. Referring back to the early 1780s, he was to write to William Cornwallis in 1804:

> 'I imbibed from you certain sentiments which have greatly assisted me in my naval career – That we could always beat a Frenchman if we fought him long enough; that the difficulty of getting at them was oftentimes more people's own fancy than from the difficulty of the undertaking; that people did not know what they could do until they tried, and that it was always to err on the right side to fight.'

The victory off Cape St Vincent was followed by the naval mutinies, but they, in turn, did not prevent victory over the Dutch in the North Sea at the battle of Camperdown on 11 October 1797. Two advancing lines of warships broke the Dutch, also 16 of the line, into three sections, the battle developed, with Admiral Adam Duncan reliant on his captains and not pursuing a rigid order, into ship-to-ship engagements in which both sides deployed effective cannonry, Dutch gunnery skill being such that British killed and wounded were proportionately closer to that of their opponent than in any other fleet action of the period. However, superior British fire helped ensure that the Dutch lost seven of the line as well as two 50-gunners. The battle was celebrated in the arts notably in a painting by Philip James de Loutherbourg. In December 1797, George III took the leading role in the Naval Thanksgiving held in St Paul's Cathedral after he had processed in state through the thronged streets of London, while captured flags were paraded through the streets by sailors and then deposited in the cathedral.

These victories were an important background to the battles with France in 1798, as the British were able to use fewer warships to mask the Dutch and Spaniards. There was both the battle of the Nile, as a result of which five of the line were added to the British navy, and the defeat of a French squadron off the Irish coast on 11 October by a larger British force. By the end of the year, France had lost 49 ships of the line.

The British remained able to deploy widely:

	Line of battle	64 gunners	50 gunners	Frigates	Total
Channel	28	3	3	33	67
North Sea	3	11	1	7	22
Ireland	4	-	-	13	17
Mediterranean	24	-	1	14	39
America	1	2	1	6	10
Newfoundland	-	1	-	4	5
Leeward Islands	4	-	1	15	20
Jamaica	6	1	1	14	22
Africa	-	-	-	3	3
Cape and East Indies	4	4	3	13	24
Detached	-	1	1	5	7
Preparing for Commission	11	-	1	9	21
Total	85	23	13	136	257

Subsequently, the British maintained the pressure on their opponents, helping ensure that the ratio of ships of the line moved in their favour. The invasion of Holland in 1799 brought no lasting advantage on land, but the Dutch fleet was captured when the entry of British warships into the Zuider Zee was combined with a mutiny on the fleet. In 1801, in a night battle near Cadiz, Rear-Admiral Sir James Saumarez with only four of the line defeated a Franco-Spanish fleet of eight of the line, capturing or destroying three.

In the meantime, in a series of small engagements that it is too easy to overlook if the focus is on large-scale battles, French warships and frigates were destroyed or captured. In part, this was matter of squadron engagements that played a major role in affirming British dominance in the Channel and the Western Approaches. Frigate squadrons were ordered to cruise off Brittany and to destroy French forces preying on British trade. In 1794, a squadron under Warren twice destroyed French frigate squadrons, while another under Pellew captured the frigate Révolutionnaire off Ushant and it was added to the fleet. In 1795, George pressed for vigour:

> 'the necessity of keeping constantly detached squadrons to keep the

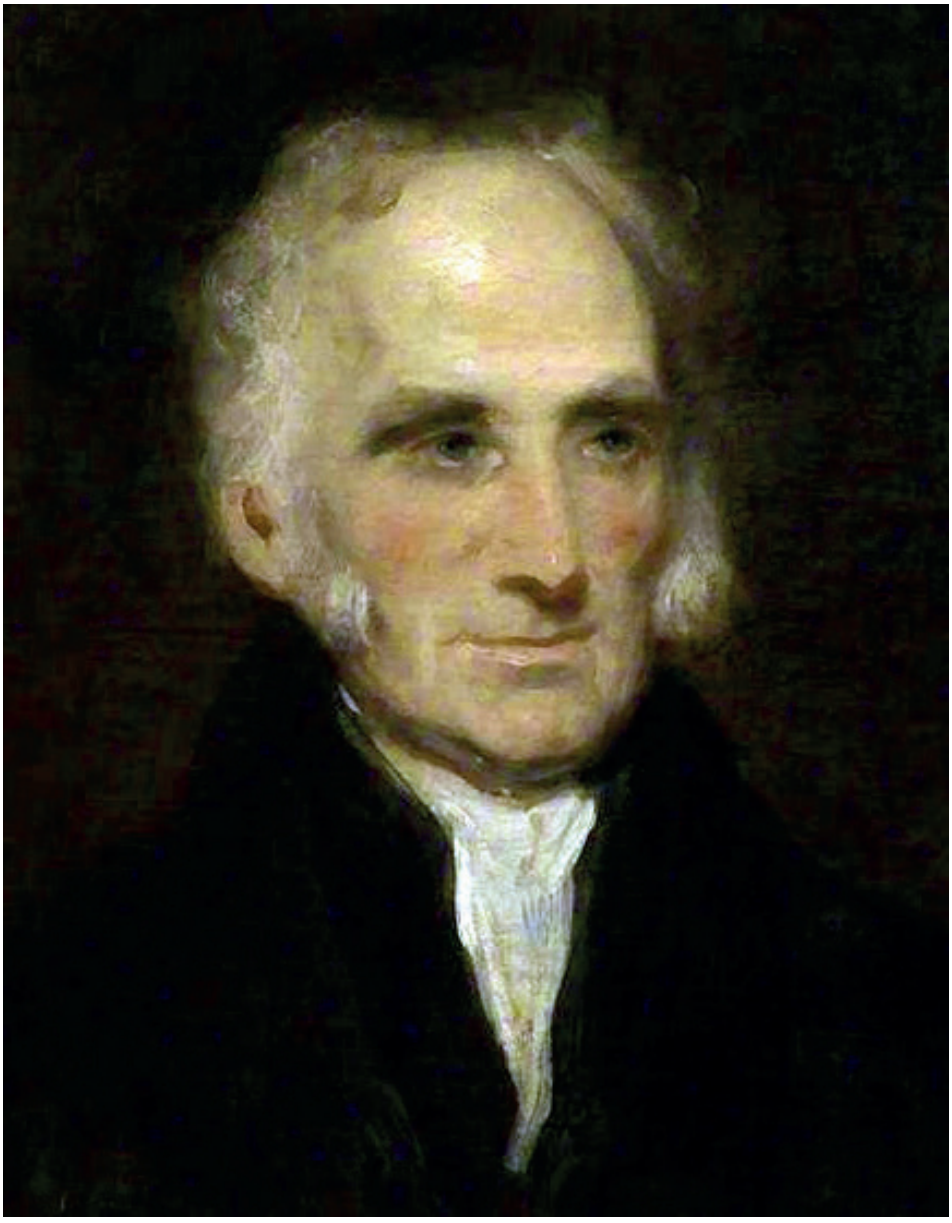
> Channel, the Bay of Biscay, and the North Sea clear of the enemy's ships; had that measure been uniformly adopted by the Admiralty I am certain by this time the trade of France would have been totally annihilated.'

A frigate squadron under Richard Strachan greatly harassed coastal trade on the Norman and Breton coasts while in 1796 another under Pellew captured two French frigates. The number of French and Dutch frigates fell dramatically between 1795 and 1800. There were individual engagements, as in 1795 when the *Nymphe* frigate under Pellew captured the *Cléopâtre* frigate in the Channel, and the *Crescent* frigate under Saumarez captured the *Réunion* frigate which had been using Cherbourg as a base to attack British trade.

Such success helped to reduce the losses of British trade, which was important as losses ensured higher insurance premiums, danger money for sailors, and the need to resort to convoys and other defensive measures that pushed up the cost of trade. Success also maintained the sense of British naval power. It was not surprising that when that sense was challenged in 1797 as a result of the naval mutinies, French privateering revived. Moreover, the protection of trade took the navy far afield, as in 1795 when Samuel Hood led a squadron into the Aegean to protect trade against French frigates based in Smyrna (Izmir).

The pursuit of commerce raiders was not restricted to European waters. In April 1797, boats from a frigate squadron attacked the town of Jean-Rabel on the northern coast of Saint-Domingue, recapturing nine merchantmen seized by the privateers based there and inflicting damage and deterrence to help protect the northern Caribbean sea lanes. Earlier that month, a French frigate had been destroyed near there. In 1798-9, in command of the *Surprise* frigate, a captured French ship, Edward Hamilton took numerous French and Spanish privateers in the Caribbean.

Nelson's victory at the Nile delighted the public, set a new standard for fighting determination and leadership capability, and transformed the strategic situation, and notably so in the Mediterranean. The dangerous commitment made by the dispatch of this fleet, not least the weakening of the fleet in home waters, was justified by victory. Now cut off, the French army in Egypt was to be defeated by an invading British force in 1801. Meanwhile, the navy blockaded French-held Malta, captured Livorno and Minorca (1798) and, the following year, provided naval support to the Turks in their successful resistance to Napoleon's siege of Acre. Sent by sea, his siege artillery was captured by British warships. Moreover



Martin Archer Shee (1769-1850), portrait (1833) of Sir Gilbert Blane, 1st Baronet of Blanefield (1749-1834), Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the Royal Society, Member of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Physician to the Fleet under Admiral Rodney (1779-1783). Royal College of Physicians, London, gift from D. R. Blane (1858). Art UK. Wikimedia Commons.

in 1799, Thomas Troubridge used naval power to make an important contribution to the struggle with the French in southern Italy, capturing Ischia, Procida and Capri, blockading the Bay of Naples, and playing a major role in the successful sieges of coastal positions, notably Civitavecchia and Gaeta. In 1800, the *Guillaume Tell*, the last surviving French warship that had escaped the battle of the Nile, a 80-gunner, was engaged at night off Malta by the 36-gun *Penelope* and delayed until two British ships of the line could come up and capture her. Malta was captured that year and the starving French temporarily driven from Genoa by blockade and bombardment. By 1800, the navy had a clear numerical advantage over France, and, notably so in the frigates crucial for trade protection.

This was scarcely an easy process, and many ships were lost, not least through going aground, as with the frigate *Jason* wrecked when pursuing a convoy near Brest in 1796 and the frigate *Artois* chasing a frigate off La Rochelle in 1797. The *Amazon* was wrecked in Audierne Bay in 1797 when the *Droits de l'Homme* was driven inshore, while the *Hannibal* ran aground and was forced to surrender in Saumarez's attack on French warships moored off Algeciras in 1801. That year, nearly 400 men drowned when the Invincible ran aground near Great Yarmouth, while the *Queen Charlotte* flagship of the Mediterranean fleet was destroyed by fire off Livorno in 1800 with the loss of nearly 700 men. Fire was a great challenge not only due to the inflammable nature of warships and their contents, especially the risks of gunpowder exploding, but also because they did not carry lifeboats or safety equipment, and most sailors could not swim.

Combat could be brutal, as in 1798 when the *Hercule*, a newly-launched 74-gunner en route from Lorient was attacked by the *Mars*, a 74-gunner part of the blockade of Brest. The two ships came alongside, the bow anchors hooked and the ships exchanged fire while touching, with many of the guns fired from in-board. The British won the hour-long gunnery exchange, the *Hercule* surrendering, but the heavy casualties, including both captains, of such engagements demonstrated that naval warfare was far from limited.

Nor, despite repeated success, was there any security for British power. Victories were encouraging, but, just as the Toulon squadron had sailed out thanks to the British blockaders being driven off station in 1798, so in April 1799, covered by fog, the Brest fleet, 26 of the line, sailed, leaving the British unsure whether the French would head for Ireland or the Mediterranean. Concern about the sa-

Isaac Cruickshank, *The Gallant Nellson bringing home two Uncommon fierce French Crocadiles from the Nile as a Present to the King* (Samuel William Fores, 7 October 1798). This satirical print is mocking British politicians Charles Fox and Richard Sheridan who celebrated Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile despite being, at least in part, pro-republican. National Maritime Museum (PAD 4102). Wikimedia Commons.

fety of Minorca handicapped the subsequent British pursuit in the Mediterranean, and the French were able to sail to Toulon, relieve Savona, and eventually return to Brest, without being intercepted. They returned with 15 Spanish of the line, ensuring that Brest posed a major challenge and that its blockade had to be strengthened.

It was generally possible for a lookout to see only about 15 miles from the top of the main mast in fine weather. However, fleets used a series of frigates stationed just over the horizon, and they signalled using their sails, which were much bigger than flags, and, because the masts were so tall, could be seen at some distance over the horizon. This relay system was particularly important for blockading British fleets: there would be an inshore squadron of highly manoeuvrable ships (which were unlikely to get caught against the dangerous lee shore

that toward which the wind was blowing) which physically watched the French in Brest and Toulon, and they then signalled using a relay of frigates to the main fleet which was located a few miles off in greater safety. Surveillance capability was surprisingly sophisticated: by simply 'looking' at a ship, its nationality, strength, skill, manpower, capability and performance could all be determined.

More generally, operational limitations were tested by skill and developments, as with signalling, and thereby the use of the signal book to direct command and control, lessening the role of *Fighting Instructions*. Howe's 1776 signal book was followed by his improved version in 1790. In addition, specialized sailing ships, in particular bomb ketches, were designed with coastal operations in shallow waters foremost in mind. There were examples of successful campaigns in precisely such waters, for example the Chesapeake campaign of 1814.

Having seized power in France in late 1799, Napoleon focused on his land war with Austria which was forced to peace in 1801. Britain's war goals toward France did not change, but, in 1801, the British expanded their commitments by taking action against the threatening Armed Neutrality of the North, a confederacy of Baltic power with naval means to the fore. Denmark rejected an ultimatum to leave the confederacy. At the battle of Copenhagen, on 2 April, Nelson, after sounding and buoying the channels by night, had sailed his division down the dangerous Hollaender Deep in order to be able to attack from an independent direction. Heavy Danish fire led Nelson's commander, Sir Hyde Parker, to order him to 'discontinue the action' if he felt it appropriate, but Nelson continued the heavy bombardment and the Danish fleet, ten of the line, was battered into submission. Denmark left the confederacy which collapsed.

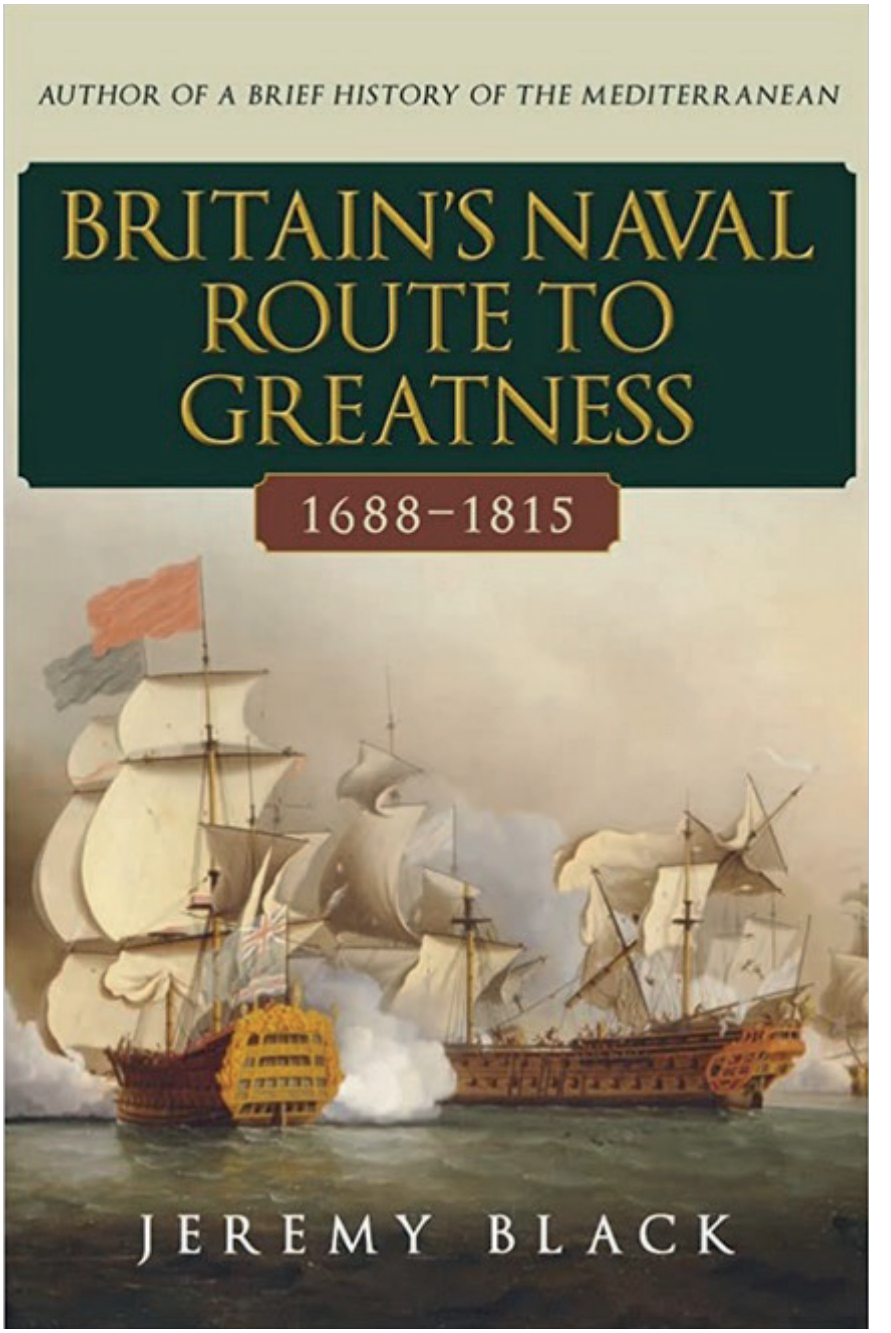
Nelson's reputation rose greatly, *Bonner and Middleton's Bristol Journal* of 25 April reporting 'The zeal, spirit, and enterprise of Lord Nelson were never more completely developed than upon this great and memorable occasion, and they happily diffused their influence through the whole of the squadron under his immediate command.' Then appointed to command the squadron assembled to repel the French invasion force believed to be assembling, Nelson attacked the boats in Boulogne harbour in August 1801 although heavy fire from the shore limited his impact.

The strategic threat remained. Britain and France negotiated the Peace of Amiens in March 1802, but an armed truce was all that pertained, with France

Augustus Pugin (1762-1832), Arrival of Admiral Lord Nelson's funeral carriage for internment at St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Ensigns captured from the Spanish and French fleet during the Battle of Trafalgar hang from the galleries.

still in control of the Dutch fleet and continuing an active programme of naval construction. Naval officers were divided over the peace, a division that reached to the naval MPs in the House of Commons, with George Berkeley joining attacks on the Addington ministry and its Admiralty. A resumption of war seemed very likely, and the navy readied itself accordingly.

Malta was a key element in contention and helped lead to an outbreak of conflict anew in 1803. Then, due to the strategic assumptions bound up in a Mediterranean fleet, both as a force enabler and as a facilitator of alliances, a large force was deployed to the Mediterranean in 1803. With France and Spain allied, Britain was in a very difficult position



Jeremy BLACK, *Britain's Naval Route to Greatness 1688-1815*,
Amberley Publishing, May 15, 2023.

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