

Nelson – A Study in Military Leadership

Admiral Arun Prakash, PVSM, AVSM, VrC, VSM (Retd)

Why Nelson?

In the 202 years since his death, every action of the legendary British sailor, Horatio Nelson has been the subject of intense scrutiny by scores of historians, biographers and maritime tacticians, who generally ascribe heroic proportions to his virtues, while occasionally demonizing him for his failings. Nelson remains, not just a Royal Navy icon, but a British national hero, and his name has entered the lexicon of the English language as an adjective: "Nelsonian".

Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 is celebrated as Trafalgar Night annually on 21st October with solemnity, pomp and circumstance, in every Royal Navy wardroom afloat and ashore. Officers, in full mess kit, having dined off the ship's best silver and crystal, rise to drink a toast to "The Immortal Memory" of Horatio Nelson, and speeches are made in his honour.

A dispassionate study of Nelson's life would reveal that as a man he was ambitious, vain, arrogant and often insubordinate; many failings which would not be tolerated in the armed forces milieu today. It would also show that he was a naval officer who possessed strategic vision, tactical brilliance, patriotic fervour, physical courage, dogged perseverance and a warm human touch; a rare combination that made him a great military leader, and won for his country, a century of maritime supremacy.

The question may well be asked: why do we need to study the life of a British naval hero? Do we not have enough of our own? The answer lies partly, in the failure of Indian historians to document and analyse the life and times of our own military leaders in adequate detail. Moreover, the scope of Royal Navy's operations in that era was huge, and a bold and enterprising naval officer could achieve much for his country. Nelson had acquired a deep understanding of the use of sea power as an instrument of state policy; and no matter how Anglophobic one may be, his exploits are still worthy of study.

This article is an attempt to acquaint the reader briefly with Nelson's early rise in the Royal Navy (RN) and provide glimpses of his important sea battles, which have become naval folklore. He set exceptional standards of courage, initiative and professionalism which are still the touchstone against which the British measure their naval officers. Even in the current Indian environment, which is far removed from 18th Century England, Nelson's actions lend themselves to examination, analysis and perhaps even emulation, because I believe that (with all his shortcomings), he demonstrates many qualities which are the quintessence of military leadership.

Early Days

Born in September 1758 into the relatively modest family of a country rector in the village of Burnham Thorpe in south-east England, Horatio was the third of the Reverend Edmund Nelson's eight children. His mother having passed away when he was nine, young Horatio's upbringing was left to his father, who did his best to give the frail lad a decent grammar school education. In 18th century England (much as in 21st century India) influence in high places was essential for a young man, not only to enter a profession, but also to make reasonable progress in life. The Nelsons did not boast of many high connections, but necessary influence was found in the shape of Horatio's maternal uncle Captain Maurice Suckling, who was commanding a Royal Navy ship, HMS Raisonnable.

Uncle Maurice graciously responded to the Nelson family's appeal for help and found young Horatio a berth in the RN. The 12 year old boy was signed on in the books of the Raisonnable as "Midshipman" on 1st January 1771, rather than "Captain's servant" or "able seaman" which was the more common method of entry. A royal commission could follow the passing of an examination for Lieutenant, to be taken after six years sea service and not before the age of twenty.

Life on board the Raisonnable gave Nelson his first taste of the harsh living and working conditions in the sailing navy of that day. Having slung his hammock in the crowded mess-deck, he helped load the stores with salt beef, biscuits, butter and casks of beer. Within a few days, the butter would turn rancid; the beef would be infested by maggots and the biscuits with an insect called weevil. But this was the crew's diet for months at sea in that era, and disease was rampant due to lack of fresh vegetables.

Then the guns, powder and shot brought out by small boats had to be swung on board by tackles. Regular sail drill required the full ship's company to scamper up the masts in all sorts of weather. This would be followed by fire drill, gun drill, boat drill and weighing of anchor manually by capstan bars. Any slackness or inefficiency was a serious offence and could invite terrible retribution through lashings by a whip called "cat o' nine tails", after which salt water would be thrown on the victim's lacerated back.

At the age of 18 (two years less than stipulated) Nelson was examined by an Admiralty Board for promotion to Lieutenant, and passed with credit. Lieutenant Nelson was appointed to the frigate Lowestoffe and sailed for Jamaica. In 1778, France joined the American rebels in their war against Britain, and there was no dearth of action at sea in the Atlantic or West Indies.

Nelson's first chance to show his mettle came, when Lowestoffe chased and overhauled an American merchantman in heavy seas. It was the First Lieutenant's (second in command of a ship) duty to board the prize and a boat was brought alongside to convey him. The officer appeared to flinch at this hazardous undertaking, and seeing his Captain's exasperation, Nelson quickly jumped in the boat and successfully boarded the captured ship. He was soon promoted First Lieutenant and then given command of a small warship in the rank of Commander.

It was in June 1779, while still in the Caribbean, that Nelson was promoted to the post of Captain at the age of twenty-one. In the RN, this meant that future promotions would be automatic and by seniority in the Navy List. Then (as perhaps now) the perennial topic of conversation in ships' wardrooms was the prospect of promotion and command. There was no fixed age of retirement and vacancies were created only by death of senior officers from disease, ship-wreck or war. In fact, a common after dinner toast used to be: "to war and a sickly season". Therefore, becoming a Captain at the age of Twenty-one, in a Navy where Midshipmen sometimes reached forty, marked Nelson out for higher things. While his uncle's influence had helped to an extent, it was Nelson's zeal, devotion, initiative and competence which had seen him rise so rapidly up the naval ladder.

Spells of peace, though infrequent, were dreaded by RN officers, because they were sent ashore, and put on half pay. Fortunately for Nelson, there was no dearth of action at sea during this period due mainly to the instability generated in Europe by a revolutionary France and the military triumphs of the brilliant young General Bonaparte soon to be crowned Emperor Napoleon.

I will now attempt to illustrate the Nelsonian legend through his exploits in battle, leaving the reader to decide whether some of the attributes displayed by him in action can be counted as "military virtues" or not.

Initiative at the Battle of Cape St Vincent

With General Bonaparte's string of victories in the Italian Peninsula, Britain's situation in the Mediterranean became untenable, and towards the end of 1796, the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir John Jervis was ordered to evacuate his forces. Nelson (now a Commodore in command of a squadron) on detached service in his flagship, the 74 gun HMS Captain chanced upon a strong Spanish fleet bound for the West Indies. An opportune fog bank allowed Nelson to make a getaway, and he sped to rendezvous with his C-in-C off Cape St Vincent to warn him of the Spanish force in the vicinity.

At dawn on 14th February 1797, the two adversaries, confronted each other; thirty Spanish men of war in two loose formations, and fifteen British ships in a single column steering for the gap between the two masses of Spanish ships. Once through, the British fleet planned to turn around, and with the wind behind them, split into two divisions to engage the Spanish van and rear.

Nelson's ship the Captain was second from the rear, and had Jervis ordered the column to turn together simultaneously, he would have been near the head of the reversed British column, able to engage the enemy immediately. When the signal flags went up on the mast, it was seen that Jervis had ordered ships to turn in succession (or follow in the wake of ship ahead). This would be a much lengthier process, and Nelson saw that it would allow time for the Spanish divisions to join up. Without hesitation, he ordered his ship to haul out of line, and steer direct for the head of the leading Spanish formation in order to engage them and allow the British time to complete their manoeuvre.

The RN Fighting Instructions of the day were quite clear about not leaving the line of battle without orders, and Nelson knew that his initiative could cost him dearly (Flag Officers had been sentenced by Courts Martial, to death by firing squad for breach of Fighting Instructions). But he pressed on to engage seven of the Spanish ships including the world's biggest warship, the 140 gun Santissima Trinidad. Part of Nelson's confidence grew from the knowledge that his gunners could fire three accurate broadsides every two minutes against the wild and sporadic fire of the Spaniards.

Nevertheless, the Captain took heavy punishment, and being rendered incapable of manoeuvre, Nelson ordered her to ram the 80-gun San Nicolas which had herself become entangled with the 112-gun San Josef. Calling for boarders; Nelson, sword in hand, led the assault which resulted in capture of both the Spanish men of war.

This gallant action resulted in Nelson being knighted and promoted to Rear Admiral.

Boldness Brings Victory at Aboukir

In July 1797, Nelson received a serious injury on his right elbow from a musket ball while participating in an unsuccessful landing in the Spanish island of Tenerife, which led to the amputation of his arm. Earlier, a splinter injury had caused considerable loss of vision in his right eye. Somewhat depressed, he spent a few months at home, before sailing out with his fleet once again in March 1798 flying his flag on the Vanguard of 74 guns.

Since the withdrawal of the British from the Mediterranean the littoral had become a hostile area and the French were taking advantage of their dominance. Reports had been coming in, of a major expeditionary force of troop transports and escorting warships being readied in French ports. It was known that General Bonaparte was in command, but his ultimate destination remained a mystery. It would be Nelson's task to lead a dangerous reconnaissance mission into the Mediterranean. The danger proved to be not just from the French Navy, but also, the elements, when the British force was hit by a hurricane causing severe damage and loss of life in the fleet.

In the next ten weeks or so, Nelson's reconnaissance force, now heavily reinforced by ships of the line, scoured the seas and criss-crossed the Mediterranean many times in search of Bonaparte's expeditionary force. Whenever the sea state permitted, Nelson would call his captains over to the Vanguard for tactical conferences in which the various combinations of possible circumstances during an encounter with the French were discussed threadbare. Thus an enduring bond was created between Nelson and his Captains which ensured that the mental thought processes of the Admiral were understood by his Captains, and vice-versa. Nelson was to famously declare later in this context, "I had the happiness to command a Band of Brothers". The prolonged and agonising search for the elusive French was not just a pedantic chore for Nelson, but also an intellectual challenge. For his lucid understanding of the contemporary geo-strategic scenario enabled him to probe the enemy's mind and try to guess the French grand design. Intelligence was to confirm Nelson's own hunch that Bonaparte's ultimate destination was India, via Egypt.

On 1st August 1798, the lookouts on Nelson's scouts sighted the masts of the French Fleet in Aboukir Bay east of Alexandria. Thirteen ships of the line including the huge 120-gun ship L'Orient flying the flag of Admiral Brueys were at anchor close to the shore.

Nelson took stock of the situation, and with three brief signals, made his intentions known to the fleet. Brueys had little choice; he thought of putting out to sea, but then realised that his fleet had many working parties ashore, and would be short handed. He felt that the massed fire of his ships could handle the British attack, which would come from seawards. With two rows of anchored ships, there was neither enough water, nor room for manoeuvre in Aboukir Bay, and Brueys did not, therefore, order the landward side guns of his ships manned; a fatal oversight.

Close to sunset, Nelson ordered his ships to attack the van and centre of the enemy line before tackling the rear. The British ships swept up the starboard side of the anchored French line, raking them with fire, and then split into two groups; the leading five ships, on their own, rounding the head of the line and then turning in shallow, uncharted waters to engage the enemy from the landward side and the rest, engaging from the seaward. Thus sandwiched between two sets of attackers, the French came under devastating fire. Admiral Brueys and his celebrated Captain Casabianca were both killed.

At 10 o'clock that night, L'Orient blew up in a tremendous explosion, and with it went French hopes of an empire in the east. The British were in command of the Mediterranean and Bonaparte's army lay marooned on a hostile shore. Nelson had been instrumental in changing the course of history.

Turning a Nelson's Eye at the Battle of Copenhagen

In early 1801 Nelson was promoted Vice Admiral and after a few months ashore, joined the Channel Fleet as second in command to Admiral Sir Hyde Parker. Parker had received orders to proceed to Copenhagen and to try and persuade the Danes, either amicably or by force, to withdraw, from a French inspired alliance that they had joined along with Russia, Sweden and Prussia with the intention of breaking the British naval blockade of France. A powerful fleet of fifteen ships was placed at his disposal in order that he could take on any combination of force that the Northern Alliance might field, at sea.

Negotiations with the Danes having failed, it was decided to mount a direct attack on Copenhagen. The city had formidable defences, natural and man-made; a long line of moored ships and floating batteries lay beneath a series of shore batteries and heavy guns of Trekroner fort. The approach channel was narrow and full of shoals, and although the fleet had some merchant navy pilots to navigate the shallows, Nelson decided to conduct his own boat survey, before formulating the battle plan, which his C-in-C was happy to leave to him.

While the situation was somewhat similar to Aboukir Bay, the same tactics could not be repeated because of the powerful shore batteries. Nelson, in consultation with his captains, evolved a plan, relying on superior British gunnery, to concentrate overwhelming fire on the moored Danish ships at night; destroying the enemy piecemeal. Nelson was to lead the assault, while Parker guarded the approaches.

On the morning of 2nd April 1801, the British Fleet sailed into action, but within a short while, four of the ships had run aground. The rest of the attackers anchored by the stern, opposite their Danish adversaries and commenced bombardment. The Danish response was however devastating, and a number of British ships were soon set on fire. To the C-in-C watching from a distance, disaster appeared imminent. Believing that Nelson was in deep trouble, but unwilling to withdraw without orders, Parker told his Flag Captain, "I will make the recall signal for Nelson's sake. If he is in a condition to continue action, he will disregard it, and if he is not, it will be an excuse for retreat."

Nelson's signal Lieutenant saw signal No. 39 flying from Parker's flagship signifying, "Discontinue Action", and reported it to his Admiral. Since Nelson took no notice, the Lieutenant shouted again and was told to watch the Danish ships. The signal Lieutenant's dilemma now was whether to pass the signal to the other ships in company or not. He was told to merely acknowledge it and keep Nelson's signal for "Close Action" flying.

Nelson then said to his Flag Captain, "You know Foley, I have only one eye - I have a right to be blind sometimes" and putting his telescope to his blind eye, exclaimed, "I really do not see any signal!" After a furious exchange of fire lasting many hours, when the British and Danish guns fell silent, it was obvious that the Danes had suffered very serious losses in the Battle of Copenhagen and had to ask for a cease fire. The subsequent negotiations conducted by Nelson resulted in a situation totally favourable to the British in the Baltic and North Atlantic.

Victory and Final Reckoning at Trafalgar

Nelson took over as C-in-C Mediterranean in 1803 just a few weeks before Britain once again declared war on France; putting an end to the year long peace wrought by the Treaty of Amiens. The following year, Spain made common cause with France, and at the behest of Emperor Napoleon declared war on Britain.

The French plans for an invasion of Britain had to be postponed many times, first on account of the close blockade of Channel ports maintained by the RN, and then due to Russia having aligned herself with Britain. A combined Franco-Spanish fleet of 33 ships under Admiral Villeneuve had been lying at anchor in the Port of Cadiz awaiting the invasion, but due to the altered situation had been ordered to the Mediterranean in October 1805. Embarked on board HMS Victory, Nelson had for some time, been awaiting a break-out by Villeneuve, and had accordingly positioned his scouts off Cadiz to provide early warning, while keeping his main force some distance away, off Cape Trafalgar.

On the morning of 20 October 1805, Nelson's frigates saw Villeneuve leading all 33 of his ships out of Cadiz. His destination was not known, and to avoid frightening him back into port, Nelson ordered his fleet to steer a parallel course, keeping well out of sight. At four on the morning of 21st October Nelson turned his fleet towards the enemy, so that by dawn they would be a few miles to windward and in a good attacking position.

Nelson paced his quarterdeck in full uniform with four stars of different Orders pinned on his breast. A suggestion that he should remove them because they could mark him out for enemy marksmen was rebuffed by Nelson. He asked two of his Captains, whom he had called on board, to accompany him to his cabin, where they witnessed his will, which he had just drawn up. Nelson walked around the lower decks of his flagship, chatting with the sailors, and then went down to his cabin, where he knelt on the deck and wrote out a prayer, in which he asked that his country be granted "a great and glorious victory."

When he came up on deck, Nelson asked his signal Lieutenant to make the famous signal to the fleet: "England expects that every man will do his duty". In tactical discussions with his Captains before the battle, Nelson had emphasised the importance of concentrating force on the centre or rear of the enemy's line, so that it broke up his formation, and produced a confused situation. Thereafter, when the smoke of the guns obscured all signals, he advocated that "No captain could go wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy." This, in a nutshell, was the "Nelson touch".

As the Battle commenced, the Victory was one of the first ships to come under heavy fire. Nelson's secretary and his clerk were killed in quick succession, and then the Victory's wheel was smashed by a shot. While cutting across the enemy line, Victory collided and became entangled with the French Redoubtable and fierce hand to hand fighting commenced. Soon after one o'clock, a French marksman's bullet found Nelson, and mortally injured, he was carried down to the sick bay. He had been shot in the spine and paralysed below the waist, and was in great pain.

At four in the afternoon, Captain Hardy of the Victory came down to congratulate the wounded Admiral on "a brilliant victory". Nelson, who had been anticipating a gale, gave his last order to Hardy to anchor the fleet. Shortly thereafter, having suffered for three hours, Lord Nelson died.

It was indeed a brilliant victory. Eighteen ships of the enemy had been destroyed, with 6000 casualties and 20,000 men taken prisoner, including Admiral Villeneuve. The British did not lose a single ship and had just 1700 casualties. The Royal navy reigned supreme on the seas.

Epilogue

Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson's body was placed in a cask of brandy mixed with camphor, for a week till the Victory reached Gibraltar under tow. There, the corpse was transferred to a lead-lined coffin filled with spirits of wine, (after sailors had sampled the brandy which had preserved it) and despatched by a fast schooner to England.

On 9th January 1806, Lord Nelson was accorded a state funeral, and buried in St Paul's Cathedral with every honour that a grateful and sorrowing nation could accord.

While history has, on the whole been kind to Nelson, many biographers have not glossed over his frailties. Pages have been written about his ambitious nature, his thirst for public acclaim, his greed for prize money and his vanity about his own accomplishments. Much scorn has also been poured over his head for his prolonged adulterous affair with Lady Emma Hamilton and neglect of his own wife. Notwithstanding all this, Nelson's legacy lives on, not just in the RN, but in the hearts and minds of his countrymen.

The string of successes that he gained in battle, by his unique combination of leadership, tactical genius, intelligence and aggression gave the nation in general and the RN in particular that unshakable self confidence, and the will to win. This, they demonstrated 177 years after Trafalgar, by sailing a Task Force 8000 miles from home to wrest the Falkland Islands back from Argentina, in 1982.

Admiral Arun Prakash, PVSM, AVSM, VrC, VSM (Retd) was the first Commander-in-Chief of the newly created Unified Andaman and Nicobar Command. He was the Chief of the Naval Staff from 31 July 2004 till his retirement on 31 October 2006. Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVII, No. 570, October-December 2007.