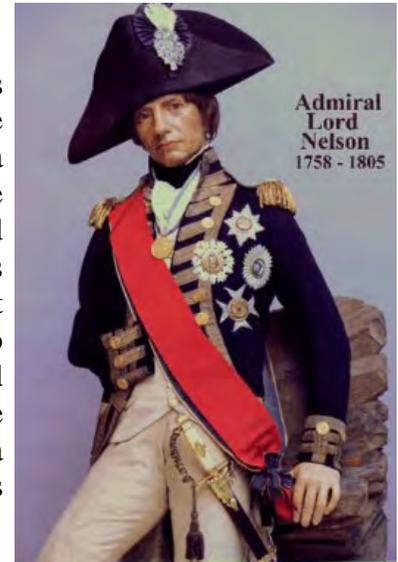


## The British Navy in Napoleonic Times



The big name in the British Navy around 1800 was Admiral Lord Nelson (1758-1805), hero of the Battle of Trafalgar, during which he was hit by a sniper's bullet but knew of his great victory before he died hours later. Earlier he had lost an arm and the use of one eye in heroic naval engagements. His flagship at Trafalgar, HMS Victory, is maintained at the Portsmouth Naval Dockyards. Visiting it, I got to see the placarded spot on the deck where he fell, and the place on the orlop deck below where he died. He is England's greatest naval hero, remembered by a high column in London's Trafalgar Square that is topped with his statue (left).



### Suggested Reading

#### Fiction:

*Master and Commander*, by Patrick O'Brian, but that's only the first of 20 volumes about its hero Jack Aubrey. The film of that name used incidents from several of the volumes, but there are enough more for a half-dozen films. O'Brian gives us a thorough acquaintance with the British Navy of the time, very detailed, and includes descriptions of flora and fauna in many parts of the world. The characters are well-drawn, the writing excellent, and the action such that it's hard to put a book down after starting it.

The *Hornblower* series, by C. S. Forester. Ten volumes covering the naval career of Horatio Hornblower, similar to O'Brian's books but not quite as good.

#### Non-Fiction:

*Cochrane, Britannia's Sea Wolf*, by Donald Thomas. Captain Lord Cochrane was the inspiration for O'Brian's Jack Aubrey, and actually performed many of his extraordinary exploits.

*The Life of Nelson*, by Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), an older biography very well-researched, but Mahan's Victorian moralizing attitude toward Nelson's philandering is tiresome.

*Horatio Nelson*, by Tom Pocock. This biography was recommended to me by a caretaker on the HMS Victory. It's a good one.

*Nelson, A Personal History*, by Christopher Hibbert. He benefited from Pocock's help—new-found letters, his notes, and his advice. Hibbert's picture of Nelson is less flattering than what we get from others, but it is good that we are made more aware of his negative characteristics. Hibbert makes very good use of letters, but gives scant descriptions of

Nelson's famous battles, belittling what Nelson considered his greatest effort, the Battle of Copenhagen. Biographers should be good writers, which Hibbert is not. His convoluted sentences make for difficult reading.

*Beloved Emma*, by Flora Fraser. A biography of Lady Hamilton, Nelson's girl friend during his later career. A fascinating person who just about destroyed Nelson's personal life and reputation. She was talented, vulgar, self-centered (like Nelson), a good nurse for him, a spendthrift, and an uncaring mother. Despite his dying wish that she be supported by England, she died in poverty across the English Channel in Calais, France.

All these books, fiction and non-fiction, show that the British Navy of Nelson's time had men who were brave, disciplined, and well-trained in all aspects of ship-handling and warfare. There was too much "politics" at the top, however, which gave Nelson much pain. The Admiralty, parliament, and royalty did not treat him as well as he deserved (mainly because of Emma), but the British people adored and honored him. His high-placed statue in Trafalgar square faces the Admiralty, but should have been placed with his back to it. Left just below, Battle of the Nile, L'Orient blowing up, and the other two paintings depict the Battle of Trafalgar.





HMS Victory Today



Where Nelson Fell

The Victory was a “first rate” ship of the line with 104 guns, including 32-pounders that could penetrate two feet of oak a mile away. Launched in 1765, she was the largest ship ever ordered by the Royal Navy. She had 27 miles of standing and running rigging and under all plain sail set four acres of canvas. At Trafalgar she carried 820 men (Hibbert says 850 is a full complement), most of whom lived and slept on the lower gun deck, crammed together in the dark at sea with the gun ports closed to keep out water. There were more men than were needed to sail the ship but in battle there was hard work for all.

There were 9 Commissioned Officers, 21 Midshipmen and 77 Non-commissioned Warrant and Petty Officers, with the rest of the crew comprising Able and Ordinary Seaman, Landsmen, supernumeraries and 31 boys. Also within the complement was a detachment of 146 Royal Marines. The crew’s average age was 22, a hundred were under 20, and a few were 10. Less than 50 were over 40. One of the crew was said to be a woman disguised as a man. About half of them had been captured by press gangs; many were convicts condemned to naval service as a penalty.

Their pay was minimal, but they shared, according to their station and behavior, in the cash realized from captured vessels or stores. Shore leave was rare, through fear of desertions. To meet the needs of the men, prostitutes were brought on board. At Brest one morning, 309 women were on board, together with 307 men.

Apart from 700 English, Irish, Scots and Welsh, 18 different nationalities were represented on the Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. Nine crewmen at Trafalgar had FRENCH as a surname (but all were British, despite the name). Three were on the Victory: Francis French, age 29, an impressed (drafted) Able Seaman; George French, age 27, Ordinary Seaman; and James French, age 22, Able Seaman. The last two were volunteers.

The Victory, first to plunge directly into the French line of ships (a maneuver known as “The Nelson Touch”) to start the battle, suffered some of the worst casualties of the Allied Fleet, with 57 of her crew killed or dying of their wounds a few days later, and 102 wounded. “Plunge” is not really the right word, as there was little wind that day. The

Victory therefore had to pierce the French line slowly, not able to begin firing before taking a great deal of damage from enemy fire. That made the British success all the more remarkable and explains Victory's numerous casualties.