

TRAFALGAR

Admiral Collingwood to W. Marsden

EURYALUS, off Cape Trafalgar
22 October 1805

The ever-to-be-lamented death of Vice-admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, who, in the late conflict with the enemy, fell in the hour of victory, leaves me the duty of informing my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, that on the 19th instant it was communicated to the Commander-in-chief, from the ships watching the motions of the enemy in Cadiz, that the combined fleet had put to sea. As they sailed with light winds westerly, his Lordship concluded their destination was the Mediterranean, and immediately made all sail for the Straits' entrance, with the British squadron, consisting of twenty-seven ships, three of them sixty-fours, where his Lordship was informed by Captain Blackwood, (whose vigilance in watching and giving notice of the enemy's movements has been highly meritorious), that they had not yet passed the Straits.

On Monday, the 21st instant, at daylight, when Cape Trafalgar bore E. by S. about seven leagues, the enemy was discovered six or seven miles to the eastward, the wind about west, and very light. The Commander-in-chief immediately made the signal for the fleet to bear up in two columns, as they are formed in order of sailing; a mode of attack his Lordship had previously directed, to avoid the inconvenience and delay in forming a line of battle in the usual manner. The enemy's line consisted of thirty-three ships (of which eighteen were French, and fifteen Spanish, commanded in chief by Admiral Villeneuve, the Spaniards under the direction of Gravina), wore with their heads to the northward, and formed their line of battle with great closeness and correctness. But as the mode of attack was unusual, so the structure of their line was new: it formed a crescent convexing to leeward; so that in leading down to their centre, I had both their van and rear abaft the beam before the fire opened. Every alternate ship was about a cable's length to windward of her second ahead and astern, forming a kind of double line, and appeared, when on their beam, to leave a very little interval between them, and this without crowding their ships. Admiral Villeneuve was in the *BUCENTAURE* in the centre, and the *PRINCE OF ASTURIAS* bore Gravina's flag in the rear; but the French and Spanish ships were mixed, without any apparent regard to order of national squadron.

As the mode of our attack had been previously determined on, and communicated to the Flag-officers and Captains, few signals were necessary, and none were made, except to direct close order as the lines bore down. The Commander-in-chief, in the *VICTORY*, led the weather column, and the *ROYAL SOVEREIGN*, which bore my flag, the lee. The action began at twelve o'clock, by the leading ships of the columns breaking through the enemy's line; the Commander-in-chief about the tenth ship from the van; the second in command about the twelfth from the rear, leaving the van of the enemy unoccupied; the succeeding ships breaking through in all parts, astern of their leaders, and engaging the enemy at the muzzles of their guns. The conflict was severe: the enemy's ships were fought with a gallantry highly honourable to their officers; but the attack on them was irresistible, and it pleased the Almighty Disposer of all events to grant his Majesty's arms a complete and glorious victory. About three P.M. many of the enemy's ships, having struck their colours, their line gave way; Admiral Gravina, with ten ships joining their frigates to leeward, stood towards Cadiz. The five headmost ships in their van tacked, and standing to the southward, to windward of the British line, were engaged, and the sternmost of them taken; the other went off, leaving to his Majesty's squadron nineteen ships of the line (of which two are first-rates, the *SANTISSIMA TRINIDAD*, and the *SANTA ANNA*), with three flag-officers, viz. Admiral Villeneuve, the Commander-in-chief; Don Ignacio Maria d'Alava, Vice-admiral; and Rear-admiral Don Baltazar Hidalgo Cisneros.

After such a victory it may appear unnecessary to enter into encomiums on the particular parts taken by the several commanders; the conclusion says more on the subject than I have language to express. The spirit which animated all was the same: when all exert themselves zealously in their Country's service, all deserve that their high merits should stand recorded; and never was high merit more conspicuous than in the battle I have described.

The *ACHILLE*, a French seventy-four, after having surrendered, by some mismanagement of the Frenchmen, took fire and blew up: two hundred of her men were saved by the tenders. A circumstance occurred during the action, which so strongly marks the invincible spirit of British seamen, when engaging the enemies of their Country, that I cannot resist the pleasure I have in making it known to their Lordships. The *TEMERAIRE* was boarded, by accident or design, by a French ship on one side and a Spaniard on the other; the contest was vigorous; but in the end, the combined ensigns were torn from the poops, and the British hoisted in their places.

Such a battle could not be fought without our sustaining a great loss of men. I have not only to lament, in common with the British Navy and the British Nation, in the fall of the Commander-in-chief, the loss of a hero, whose name will be immortal, and his memory ever dear to his Country; but my heart is rent with the most poignant grief for the death of a friend, to whom, by many years of intimacy, and a perfect knowledge of the virtues of his mind, which inspired ideas superior to the common race of men, I was bound by the strongest ties of affection—a grief, to which even the glorious occasion in which he fell does not bring the consolation which, perhaps, it ought. His Lordship received a musket-ball in his left breast, about the middle of the action, and sent an officer to me immediately with his last farewell, and soon after expired. I have also to lament the loss of those excellent officers, Captain Duff, of the MARS, and Cooke, of the BELLEROPHON: I have yet heard of none others.

I fear the numbers that have fallen will be found very great when the returns come to me; but it has blown a gale of wind ever since the action, and I have not yet had it in my power to collect any reports from the ships. The ROYAL SOVEREIGN having lost her masts, except the tottering foremast, I called the EURYALUS to me while the action continued, which ship, lying within hail, made my signals—a service Captain Blackwood performed with very great attention. After the action I shifted my flag to her, that I might the more easily communicate my orders to, and collect the ships, and towed the ROYAL SOVEREIGN out to seaward. The whole fleet were now in a very perilous situation; many dismasted, all shattered, in thirteen fathom water, off the shoals of Trafalgar; and when I made the signal to prepare to anchor, few of the ships had an anchor to let go, their cables being shot. But the same good Providence which aided us through such a day, preserved us in the night, by the wind shifting a few points and drifting the ships off the land, except four of the captured dismasted ships, which are now at anchor off Trafalgar, and I hope will ride safe until the gales are over.

Having thus detailed the proceedings of the fleet on this occasion, I beg to congratulate their Lordships on a victory, which, I hope, will add a ray to the glory of his Majesty's crown, and be attended with public benefit to our Country.

I am, &c.