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History of the Royal Navy

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*On Trafalgar*

The Battle of Trafalgar is probably the single most famous battle in the history of the Royal Navy, which was able to overcome a deficit of 6 ships and almost 500 guns to come away victorious. The brilliant leadership of Admiral Nelson and the British belief in the total supremacy of the Royal Navy in matters of war at sea are not enough to fully explain the fact that the British were able to bring off an impressive victory after being at an apparent initial disadvantage. More concrete reasons for such a reversal of fortune must exist, and on closer examination it becomes clear that it is conceivable that the British were not in actuality at as great of a disadvantage at the outset as the numbers would suggest, and that the superior armament, fleet organization, composition, and tactics of the British force are what allowed the British to defeat the French and Spanish despite the odds once they engaged.  
 From the very beginning of the battle, there were several elements that stood in the British navy’s favor. First, Admiral Villeneuve had ordered the Combined Fleet to wear in succession in order to reorder his line of battle, “further [disorganizing] an already loose formation, and [introducing] a pronounced curve in the Combined Fleet’s line,” (Rodger 539). This maneuver was both unexpected by the allied captains and in and of itself very difficult to perform properly in a large fleet. On receiving the order, one Spanish Captain, Don Chosmé Churruca of the *San Juan Nepomuceno*,went so far as to remark that,“The fleet is doomed. The French Admiral does not understand his business. He has compromised us all,” (Adkins 71). Don Chosmé might not have been far off the mark, for in ordering the fleet to wear in an attempt to bring order to his line, Villeneuve actually made his line more disordered, leaving it vulnerable to attack by the British, who were in an organized battle-ready formation from the beginning.   
 One further grave error in positioning was made by the Combined Fleet which probably contributed a great deal to the outcome of the battle, namely that the French and Spanish reserve squadron under Admiral Gravina disregarded orders from Villeneuve to remain apart from the battle to act as reinforcements for whatever part of the line was hardest hit. Instead of remaining apart, Gravina ordered his ships to join the rear of the allied line. As Adkins puts it, following Gravina’s decision to join the line, “[a]ll thirty-three French and Spanish battleships were now ranged in a long ragged line, without any outlying battleships to provide rapid support wherever it was needed, an error that could only aid the British,” (Adkins 73).  
 The weather conditions in which the battle of Trafalgar took place may also had a considerable impact on the outcome. Light winds as those present on the day of the battle tended to favor lighter ships. Heavier ships, of which the French and Spanish fleet was largely comprised, were at a decided disadvantage in point of maneuverability, as has been seen above in the instance of Villeneuve’s wearing maneuver, a disadvantage which showed itself at several other points in the battle, invariably to the advantage of the British. First and perhaps most importantly the van of the Combined Fleet under Admiral P.E. Dumanoir le Pelley found it very difficult to return to the battle until the battle had been going on for some time and encountered a disastrous result when signaled to turn together in the light winds, “[t]he *Intrépide* collided with the *Mont-Blanc* during the turn…[t]he *Rayo*,the *San Juan*, the *San Francisco de Asís*, the *Durguay-Trouin*, and the *Neptuno* all managed the turn…very slowly,” (Adkins 162). This unengaged force had the potential to carry the day if they had been able to engage the British fleet sooner in the battle, but by the time they were able to come into action, it was already too late.

The disorder within the Combined Fleet also prompted Lord Nelson to change his plan of battle and attempt to drive his fleet across the enemy’s line and fire into the unprotected fore and stern of his enemies at close range, rather than turning parallel to the enemy at the last moment in order to exchange broadsides. The decision to “cross the enemy’s T” instead of bearing up alongside created an unmatched tactical opportunity for the British ships to rake the enemy and inflict maximum damage should they make it across the gap separating the two fleets in the face of the combined broadside of the French and Spanish line, but Nelson’s plan also provided the Combined Fleet with a golden opportunity to inflict heavy losses on the British, and it is reasonable to assume that had they leveraged this advantage properly, the battle might have come out much differently.   
 Fortunately for the British, they were fighting French and Spanish commanders rather than British commanders. According to Adkins, “[i]f the French and Spanish gunnery had been as fast and accurate at long range as the British, the *Royal Sovereign* would have been hit by more than sixteen broadsides…in the time it took to reach the line…enough to completely destroy the ship,” (Adkins 102). Thankfully, as far as the British were concerned, the French and Spanish gunnery was not so fast and accurate at long range. In addition to the inferiority of the French and Spanish gunnery, it was a general rule in the French and Spanish fleets to direct fire at the rigging of their enemies in the hopes of dismasting and disabling them, rather than directing fire at their enemy’s hull in an attempt to cripple her armament and crew. Because of this, the inferior nature of allied gunnery, and the fact that, “[w]hen the British fleet began to come within range of the French and Spanish ships, a heavy swell hitting the Combined Fleet…side-on caused the most difficult conditions for the French and Spanish gunners,” (Adkins 104), the leading British ships were able to cover the gap between the fleets where they were most exposed without suffering severe damage or heavy casualties.

Considering the desire of the British to bring the battle to close quarters and exchange broadside after broadside with the enemy at point-blank range, the allies’ decision to attack the enemy’s maneuverability rather than their crew and armament was ill-advised. Had the allies fired low at the oncoming British ships as they advanced across the gap, the British would have probably suffered much greater casualties and structural damage than they actually did, which in turn would have reduced the effectiveness of their gunnery once they finally did close with the allies. Instead, as the Prince of Joinville noted, once the British engaged the Combined Fleet the disparity between the two modes of gunnery became readily apparent, for, “[a]n English shot would kill twenty of our men; a French shot in reply would cut a line or make a hole in a sail,” (Rodger 541).

Another advantage which the British fleet enjoyed from the beginning of the battle was that they had put their largest, most powerful ships at the front of their line, out of keeping with the general British strategy at the time. The lead ships were better capable of withstanding the brunt of the heretofore undamaged fire of the Combined Fleet while at the same time better able to inflict serious damage on their opponents when they finally came into range. For instance, the *Royal Sovereign* was able to engage the 112-gun *Santa Ana* and batter her into a most sorry state while taking fire from the *Fougueux, Indomptable, San Leandro,* and the *San Justo* at the same time until *Belleisle* was able to range up and relieve some of the pressure on the *Royal Sovereign*. Over the course of the battle, “Collingwood’s *Royal Sovereign* fought eight ships of the line, of which one alone, the…*Santa Ana*, suffered double her losses,” (Rodger 542). If smaller ships had been sent in at the front of the columns, it is reasonable to assume that the Combined Fleet would have been able to handle them more quickly while suffering less damage and ending in a better position to deal with the heavier ships when they arrived than they did in dealing with ships like the *Royal Sovereign*, *Victory,* and *Temeraire*,a ship which damaged the *Redoubtable* so badly that her captain found it, “difficult to describe the dreadful carnage caused by [her] murderous broadside,” (Adkins 150),before the smaller ships.  
 Of further importance to the ultimate outcome of the battle was the fact that Nelson ordered his captains to fight their ships individually and as they saw fit once the battle was joined. This provided the British captains with a distinct advantage over, “the French and Spanish captains who would be hampered by the custom of waiting for specific directions from their commander-in-chief,” (Adkins 101) a custom which became increasingly difficult if not downright impossible as the battle wore on due to the difficulties associated with communicating signals through a fleet engaged in close action.

When battle was finally joined, the British advantage in gunnery began to tell quite heavily on the enemy; “no one on either side had any illusions about the relative strengths of the two fleets. What counted was not the number of guns, but how rapidly they could be fired,” (Adkins 89). The British were primarily armed with flintlock guns, whereas the allies were armed with guns that had to be fired with linstock matches. Flintlock guns were capable of a faster rate of fire, more accurate, and more generally reliable than match-fired guns, so even though the British were at a disadvantage in the number of guns that they were able to bring to bear, they had a distinct advantage with respect to the quality and utility of those guns. As the battle wore on, the ability of the British to pour shot into the allies faster than they could return fire became increasingly pronounced. At close range, firing into allied hulls with double and triple shotted guns, the British were able to inflict extreme losses, which had a drastic negative impact on two of the Combined Fleet’s three initial advantages in the battle: superior manpower and a greater number of guns. The more personnel the British were able to kill, the fewer guns the Combined Fleet could fire, a state of affairs which snowballed in conjunction with mounting structural damage to give the British the upper hand.

There remain two points to be made regarding the nature of the crews of the French and Spanish fleets as they compared to the English crews. While the British crews had had many months of experience in performing maneuvers at sea and firing guns at live targets, the crews of the Combined Fleet, “who had not been confined to harbor by the blockade were nowhere near as efficient as the British,” (Adkins 90). Furthermore, even though the British were outmanned, many of the additional men in the allied fleet were soldiers, not trained sailors. Soldiers did not provide a significant advantage when it came to fighting the ship, and were only of actual use as members of boarding parties or small-arms crews in the tops; in fact, it was generally the case that they “got in the way of the sailors and hindered the efficiency of the gun crews,” (Adkins 90), something that the Combined Fleet could ill afford, considering the myriad other disadvantages under which they joined the action.  
 After making a close survey of the evidence surrounding the British victory at Trafalgar, it is difficult to envision the battle turning out in any way but in the favor of the British. Other than the advantage in manpower, number of guns, and press of ships, the Combined Fleet did not enjoy a single additional tactical advantage over the British. What is more, they did not make proper use of their opportunities and advantages while they had them. In such an instance, and under such a preponderance of evidence, it is difficult to see the British as the underdogs in the battle. Trafalgar was won, not by luck, not by chance, but by a skilled British force that took its opportunities, outmatched the allies man-for-man in point of skill, and outplayed its opponent consistently throughout the course of the day.