

Very unusually - in fact, for the very first time - we have two 'On This Day' emails in a row, instead of having one on Tuesday and one on Thursday. This is because today is Trafalgar Day - the 215th anniversary of the BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR, on 21 October 1805 - and I couldn't lose the chance to tell you about it. The battle was fought at sea, between 27 ships belonging to the British Navy and 33 ships belonging to the combined French and Spanish navies. The battle was one of many fought during the NAPOLEONIC WARS between the British and the French under Napoleon Bonaparte, and which ended with Napoleon's defeat at the BATTLE OF WATERLOO, on 18 June 1815, almost ten years after the Battle of Trafalgar. (I told you about Napoleon and the Battle of Waterloo all the way back in my very first email to you on April 6.) Just as the Battle of Waterloo was a big defeat for Napoleon on land, the Battle of Trafalgar was a big defeat for Napoleon at sea. The French and Spanish ships which the British took on at

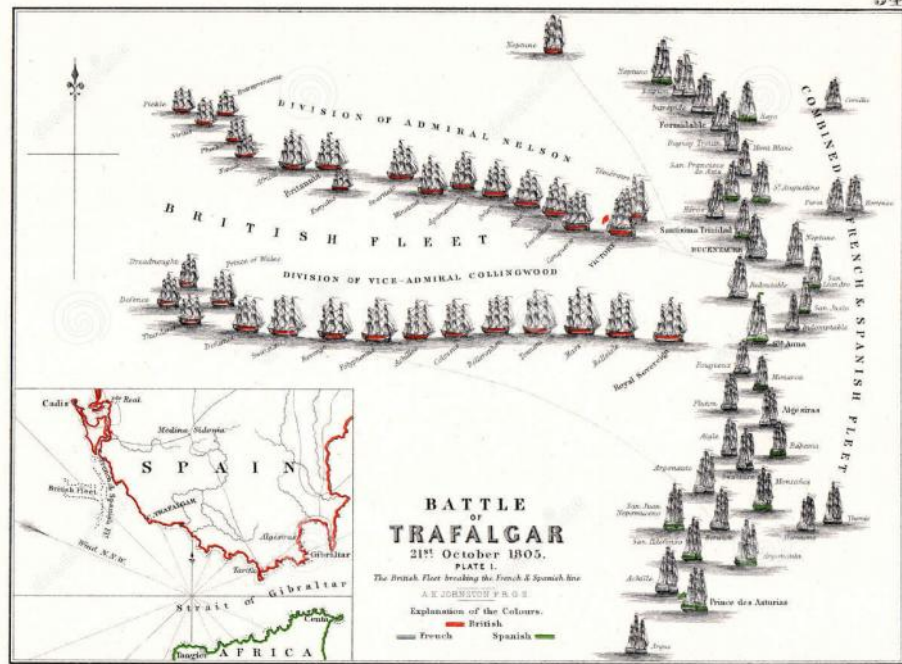


the Battle of Trafalgar had been intended for the English Channel - Napoleon's plan was that they would take control of the English Channel, and that would allow him to sail across to England and conquer England. Instead, by winning the Battle of Trafalgar, sinking or capturing 22 of the 33 French-Spanish ships, the British ensured that they kept control not just of the English channel, but all of the world's oceans - and they would remain in control well into the 20th century (when the Americans became the biggest naval power in the world).

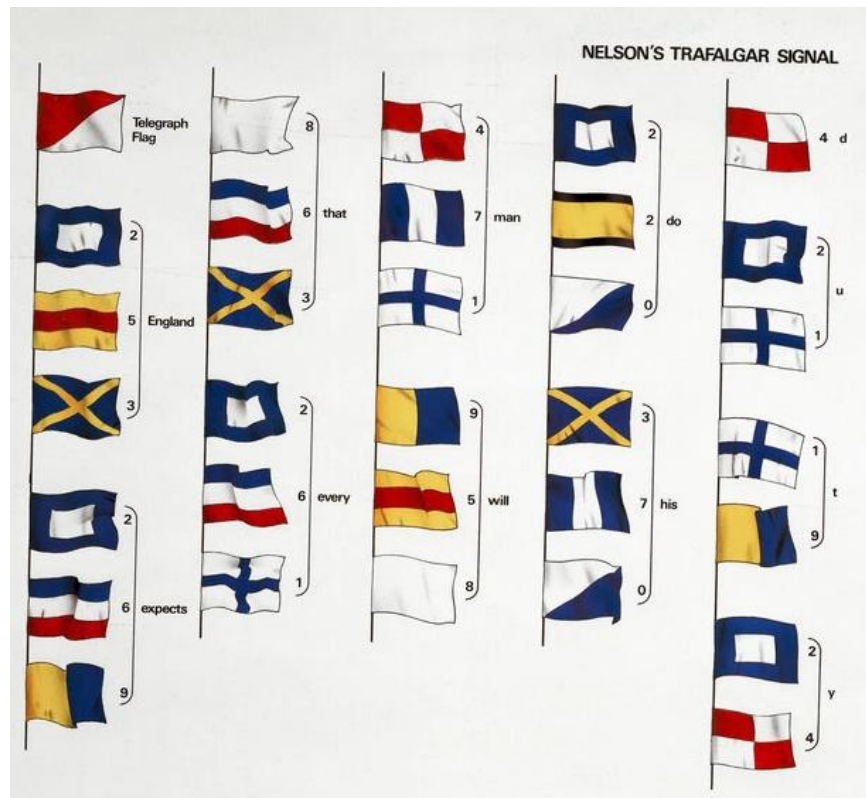
The British fleet was commanded by ADMIRAL HORATIO NELSON. He had already scored big victories over Napoleon at sea in the BATTLE OF THE NILE in 1798 and at the BATTLE OF COPENHAGEN in 1801. He had already suffered major injuries in various sea battles - suffering an injury to his right eye in 1794, and losing his right arm in 1797. It is said that during the Battle of Copenhagen, the British Admiral in charge of the battle put up a signal on his ship, ordering the other British ships to withdraw. Nelson, on his ship, was told about the signal, but raised his telescope to his bad eye and said 'I see no signal - we fight on' and his ship did fight on and won a big victory. Ever since, when someone deliberately ignores something they are said to 'turn a blind eye' to it. Nelson knew about the French plans to clear the English channel, and he knew that a big fleet of French and Spanish ships was being assembled in the south of Spain to sail up to the English channel. So Nelson waited for the ships to set sail, and attacked them just off Cape Trafalgar - which is why the battle is known as the 'Battle of Trafalgar'.

Nelson was a brilliant military commander, and he came up with a brilliant plan to attack the French and Spanish ships. The normal way of attacking would have been for Nelson to line up his ships alongside the French and Spanish ships as they sailed north in a long line and then have his ships fire on the French and Spanish ships and be fired on in turn. But the trouble with doing that is that it made it too easy for the French and Spanish to sail away from Nelson's ships, and bring the battle to an end - when Nelson wanted to have a decisive battle, which would enable him to destroy or capture the French and Spanish ships, with no possibility of escape for them. So he came up with a plan where he would divide his ships into two lines, with one line of ships sailing straight into the French and Spanish line of ships

just above the middle of the line, and the other line of ships sailing straight into the French and Spanish line just below the middle of the line. That way, he would break the line of French and Spanish into three parts - the top part of the line above the first line of British ships, the middle part of the line between the two lines of British ships, and the bottom part of the line below the second line of British ships. That way the middle of the line of French and Spanish ships would be caught in a trap between two sets of British ships and would have no way of escaping.



Before the battle, Nelson ordered that flags be hoisted on his ship, HMS VICTORY, to send a signal to all the other British ships. Nelson ordered that the signal should say 'England confides that every man will do his duty'. But the person in charge of running up the flags said it would be easier if the word 'confides' was replaced by the word 'expects'. 'Very well - "expects" it is,' said Nelson and the signal went out: ENGLAND EXPECTS THAT EVERY MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY.



And everyone on the British side did. Nelson's plan worked like a dream, and resulted in one of Britain's biggest naval victories. Not one British ship was lost in the battle, while 22 of the French and Spanish ships were captured or destroyed. Over four thousand French or Spanish sailors were killed in the battle, while a tenth of that number - 458 - were killed on the British side.



But such a big victory came at an enormous cost. In the middle of the battle, with Nelson's ship Victory in the thick of the action, a French rifleman on a French ship alongside the Victory saw a chance to shoot at Nelson. He raised his rifle, fired, and Nelson fell, fatally shot through the back. Nelson was taken down below and everyone around him tried to make him comfortable. Nelson knew he was dying, telling the ship's doctor, 'You can do nothing for me. I have but a short time to live.' Nelson asked to see his friend, Thomas Hardy, who was the captain of the Victory. It is disputed what Nelson said to him when Hardy came to see him. On some accounts he said, 'Kiss me Hardy' and Hardy kissed him on the cheek. But others think he said, 'Kismet, Hardy' - where Kismet means 'fate': Nelson was saying that it was his fate to die in the middle of his greatest victory. His final words were 'Thank God I have done my duty' and then 'God and my country'.



After the battle was over, Nelson's body was preserved and given a hero's funeral at St Paul's Cathedral back in England, and Nelson's body is buried there - and you can see it sometime, if you are allowed to by people who don't possess one millionth of Nelson's heroism and intelligence. Lots of memorials were put up to Nelson after his death, but the most famous was completed in 1843 - Nelson's Column, in the middle of Trafalgar Square. And you can see that too sometime.

