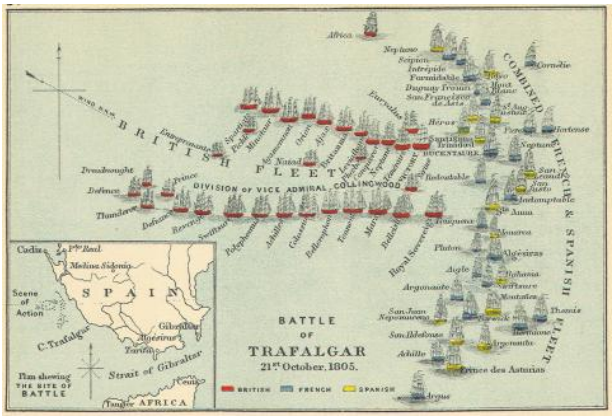
Battle of Trafalgar - Nelson's Winning Plan



Horatio Nelson is Britain's national hero, but what he did at Trafalgar made him a legend. Let's investigate why.

It was September, of 1805, when Horatio Nelson first told someone of his plans for a new kind of naval warfare. The Vice Admiral was home, at Merton Place in England, taking a walk with his colleague Captain Richard Keats (who, at the time, was commanding officer of HMS *Superb*, a 74-gun battleship).

Nelson's idea was not an original one, conceptually, but it was the first time anyone would make a plan where ships of the line would not engage each other in parallel lines of battle. Keats later told Edward Hawke Locker about Nelson's description of that world-changing plan:

> *...[H]e said to me, "No day can be long enough to arrange a couple of Fleets and fight a decisive Battle according to the old system. When we meet them...for meet them we shall, I'll tell you how I shall fight them. I shall form the Fleet into three Divisions in three Lines.*
>
> *One Division shall be composed of twelve or fourteen of the fastest two-decked Ships, which I shall keep always to windward, or in a situation of advantage; and I shall put them under an Officer who, I am sure, will employ them in the manner I wish if possible. I consider it will always be in my power to throw them into Battle in any part I may choose...*
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> *With the remaining part of the Fleet formed in two Lines, I shall go at them at once, if I can, about one-third of their Line from their leading ship."*
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> *He then said, "What do you think of it?" Such a question I felt required consideration. I paused. Seeing it, he said, "But I'll tell you what I think of it. I think it will surprise and confound the Enemy. They won't know what I am about. It will bring forward a pell-mell battle, and that is what I want."* (See footnote 9, at pages 241-2, of *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, with Notes by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, Volume 7, August to October 1805.)

Nelson, learning that the French-Spanish combined fleet had put into the port of Cadiz (in Spain), left his home on the 13th of September, 1805, to take command of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet. Hoisting his flag aboard HMS *Victory*, he sailed to join the rest of the ships.

What would the other officers say when Nelson told them about his plan to engage the enemy ships? He tells us himself, with these words:

> *I believe my arrival was most welcome, not only to the Commander of the Fleet, but also to every individual in it; and, when I came to explain to them "the Nelson touch," it was like an electric shock. Some shed tears; all approved—"It was new—it was singular—it was simple!"; and, from Admirals downwards, it was repeated—"It must succeed, if ever they will allow us to get at them!"...* (See *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, Volume 7, at pages vi-vii.)

Nelson and his men, and ships, were able "to get at them" when Napoleon gave orders to his fleet to leave Cadiz. The Emperor was mounting a land campaign against Austria and wanted his ships closer to that action.

It was, alas, a disastrous decision by Napoleon to order those ships to leave the safety of Cadiz harbor. Nelson was waiting for them with his plan for a "pell-mell battle."

What did he mean by that description?

By 1805, naval battles consisted of "ships of the line" battering each other until one side sustained more heavy damage than the other side. It was like a war of attrition, with surviving ships, from both sides, limping home for repairs. Nelson didn't want to use that approach for his next major battle.

Instead, his plan would position his ships very differently than enemy officers would expect. The British ships would approach the French and Spanish ships in separate columns.

One column of ships (led by Nelson) would be in the windward position, moving as fast as possible using as much sail power as circumstances allowed. They would split the French and Spanish line in the center, thereby preventing those ships from helping the rest of their fleet.

The other column of British ships, led by Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood, would rout the enemy's rear.

This tactic would give Nelson the "pell-mell battle" he so greatly desired.

The actual battle unfolded just as Nelson had planned. Smashing through the middle of the French and Spanish line, he cut the fleet in two. Ships in the northern part of the line could not join the battle in the south, where Collingwood was routing the enemy's rear.

Nelson started the battle with 27 ships of the line and lost none. The combined fleet against him started the battle with 33 ships of the line and lost 18.

After a horrific gale developed, even more French and Spanish ships were lost.

Britain, however, lost the man who had conceived the battle plan. As *Victory* came into close contact with *Redoutable* (a French ship), a sniper in her rigging located Nelson who was pacing on the upper deck of his ship. The sniper's shot (a musket ball) hit Nelson in the left breast, causing the Admiral to tell Thomas Hardy:

> *Hardy, I believe they have done it at last.* (See *Dispatches and Letters*, at page 240.)

Lord Nelson was right. *He* was finished, but his battle plans had changed the world of naval warfare.

Click on the map for a much-better view.

Credits:

Map image, depicting the Battle of Trafalgar and the battle lines of Nelson's ships at right angles to the French/Spanish line from Samuel Rawson Gardiner D.C.L., L.L.D., *School Atlas of English History* (London, England: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914). Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Questions 2 Ponder

Is It Smart to Try a New Plan in the Heat of Battle?

Admiral Horatio Nelson conceived an entirely new (and untried) battle strategy, then implemented it without first testing his ideas in real life.

When Nelson first imagined this new type of naval-battle plan, he used a simple phrase—"pell-mell battle"— to summarize his novel idea.

What was the Admiral trying to convey when he used that description in his discussion with Captain Richard Keats?

What do the words "pell mell" convey to you?

In the World of Ideas, How Do "Simple" and "Effective" Work Together?

Sometimes extremely effective ideas are "simple," as Admiral Nelson described his Trafalgar battle plan.

Do you think that people, in the 21st century, value simple-but-effective approaches to problem solving? Explain your answer.

When we try to solve problems, do you think we sometimes overlook the simpler way in favor of more complicated solutions? If so, do you think that approach has anything to do with the age of technology in which we live? Explain your answer.

What was "simple" about Admiral Nelson's approach to the naval battle, against Napoleon and his Allies, at Trafalgar? What made his plan so effective?

Why is Admiral Nelson still considered one of Britain's greatest national heroes?