

*Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and
Nelson's Battle of Trafalgar*
By Adam Nicolson

Let me begin by saying this was a fascinating book recommended by Vistage member, Rita Benson LeBlanc, CEO of the New Orleans Saints. I spoke before her Vistage CEO group in New Orleans in December of 2006. After hearing me speak she *Seize the Fire*. I will always read a book recommended by someone with her credentials. I am glad I did. Amazon offers a general description of the book as follows:

“On October 21, 1805, the British navy crushed the combined fleets of Spain and France near Spain’s Cape Trafalgar, thwarting Napoleon Bonaparte’s planned invasion of England and leading to a century of British maritime dominance. There are many books on the Battle of Trafalgar, but this one is different in that Adam Nicolson focuses more on ‘the mental landscape’ of those who fought than on the battle itself. In analyzing why the British scored such an impressive victory, Nicolson looks beyond tactics to study the collective psychology of the three navies, along with the social and cultural forces at work. Part of the study revolves around the concept of the hero at the dawn of the 19th century. The men who fought at Trafalgar ‘looked on battle not as a necessary evil but as a moment of revelation and truth’ that played into their conception of purpose, honor, and duty to king and country—with violence seen as an integral part of duty. No one fit the classic model of the hero more than Admiral Lord Nelson, the “most feared naval commander in the world”; a man who saw himself as a ‘prophetic agent of apocalypse and millennium’ destined to lead England to global dominance. Nelson became the model of the British hero for the rest of the century and beyond.”

In the book’s preface, Nicolson asks, “How do the semi-understood, but widely inherited ideas about purpose, violence, and victory, which are present in any evolved society, shape the way men behave in battle. Battle is not simply a question of ideology, military expertise or technology. Deeper and more personal forces are in play intimate battle of the kind Nelson invited and created, inevitably engages men at their innermost levels.”

Here are some of the interesting historical facts and insights I gleaned from this book and how they can apply in our business and personal lives:

1. I never gathered the importance of the Battle of Trafalgar in the scheme of world history. Very simply, the British, French, and Spanish were never the same again. Nor was the rest of the world.
2. Even violence can be talked about in terms of beauty, peace, and righteousness in action.

3. Nelson's men "looked on battle not as necessary evil but as a moment of revelation and truth. Death or victory, not the middle road, was viewed as the general resolution of the ship's crew."
4. 47,000 men were involved in the battle. The combined fleet of the French and Spanish had 26 ships and lost approximately 6,500 lives and the British fleet had 33 ships and lost perhaps 650 lives. A ten-to-one beating.
5. The author went into much detail describing the distinctions in leadership styles between the British, French, and Spanish. The British were portrayed as cohesive entrepreneurists; the French as pre-revolutionary aristocrats; and the Spanish from an earlier world altogether. At the time of the battle, many of the British ships were in far superior condition both due to funding and R&D efforts. (There were some excellent French ships as well.) Officers in the New British navy were promoted based on merit, not class rank. The rewards for success in battle could be financially rewarding. Failure could mean the loss of everything. At the same time, these ships were manned in part by drunks, stowaways, the sick, and injured.
6. Interestingly, "British sailors were known as limeys for the very reason they drank citrus juice drinks. Nelson would sip lemonade as he died, but Gravina (Spanish admiral) ignored the advice. It was not what the Spaniards did. Lime and lemon juice was introduced to the Spanish fleet and scurvy continued its wild career among the sad, impoverished crews."
7. In 1801, one French admiral wrote about his crew, "I once more call your attention to the terrible state in which the sea men are left, unpaid for fifteen months, naked or covered with rags, badly fed, down in the mouth; in a word sunk under the weight of the deepest and most humiliating wretchedness."
8. Trafalgar was the last in a series of battles that began in 1793 wherein the British were estimated to have lost 1,483 in battle and the enemy (French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish) lost 9,068 in battle. Britain had become a killing machine on the seas.
9. Even in the British Royal Navy, punishment could be brutal.
10. "Orderliness was in the air. Over 200 English grammars had been published in the second half of the 18th century, by which the wild sprouts of the language were to be disciplined and trained. The water closet with a ball-cock to control the inrush of water into the cistern had been invented in 1778. Public hangings at Tyburn in the west end of London had been done away with in 1783. Branding of criminals had been abolished. The Ordinance Survey, by which every inch of the British Isles was to be precisely triangulated, surveyed and mapped, had been founded in 1793. Income tax had been imposed by Pitt for the first time in 1798. Deduction at source had followed two years later. The first National Census had been conducted in 1801. A year later Thomas Telford had spanned the Thames in one leap with the new London Bridge. In 1803 Luke Howard had named the clouds for the first time. The numbering of London houses became compulsory in 1805. In January 1806, on station off the coast of South America, Captain Francis Beaufort developed the first version of the Beaufort scale by which, ever since, wind has been calibrated in precise increments."
11. The fleet at Trafalgar represented 15% of the British Arms strength at sea, no more than the fighting tip of an organization spread across the whole Eastern Atlantic.

12. "England confides that every man will do his duty." According to Nicolson, Nelson's instinct for "confides" rather than "expects" was right. To "expect" is to command, but to "confide" is to trust.
13. The titles of the chapters alone are interesting: "Zeal," "Order and Anxiety," "Honor," "Love," "Boldness," "Violence," "Nobility." At some level it seems like this is what all organizations and all people go through.
14. It is interesting how the British officers dress finely for battle, and stayed quite apparent throughout the entire affair. No hiding, willing to take the bullet as readily as any of the other men. I often wonder how "out front" our own leadership is. Do they also lead by example?
15. At the time of Trafalgar, it was estimated an average of about 5,000 men in a world navy died every year: 400 in action, 500 in shipwreck, 2,600 from disease, and almost 1,700 from accidents onboard. As Nicolson pointed out, in a war that lasted 22 years that gives a figure of about 37,000 men who died from accidents onboard.
16. "On either side of the class division, a form of love operated. The British fleet was thick with it. Officers loved officers and men loved men. That closeness did not cross the divide between quarterdeck and lower deck. But, without doubt, on the best ships, there was a sense of oneness in a ship's company, a treasuring by men of a commander they admired; and a nurturing of the commander of the man he relied on."
17. "The man who endeavors to carry all before him by mere dint of his authority and power would appear to me to know little indeed of human nature. Surely there can be no comparison between those who obey from fear and those who do it from inclination, or those who feel that necessary restraint alone is correctly laid on them." Captain Anselm, John Griffins in his *Observation on some Points of Seamanship*, published in 1809. The point is, the British didn't just fight with good mechanics, they fought with heart, with passion, with love, and that turned into an intensity unparalleled in naval history.
18. "Nelson had an instinct for devastation and the people of England detected it in him. He knew in his bones that the public demand was for convincing and destructive violence, not a harmless strategic victory."
19. "Love, honor, zeal, and skill won the day."
20. The battle lasted from 12:30 PM to 5:00 PM on October 21st, 1805.
21. The way in which the author describes the battle scenes is both horrifying and glorious. The duality of the violence.
22. Admiral Collingwood wrote of Nelson after Trafalgar: "There is nothing like him left for gallantry and conduct in battle. It was not a foolish passion for fighting for he was the most gentle of all human creatures and often lamented the cruel necessity of it, but it was a principle of duty which all men owed their country in defense of her laws and liberty."
23. According to Nicolson, the first strike was so important because it was very difficult to claw your way back from a losing position. "It is a question, as in business, of trends. A small advantage, slowly opening, will, in the end, bring you victory." The fighting is absolute, frenzied, and horrifying. The scene is probably as intense a combination of the intimate and the bloody as any in the history of warfare.
24. Nelson's demise came about by either a French sharpshooter or from a piece of flying debris. It went through his shoulder, lung, and lodged in his spine. He passed away at about 4:30 in the afternoon, two and three-quarter hours after he'd been wounded. By that time, the battle was won and Nelson knew of his victory.

25. Nelson left behind his wife, his mistress, and their child. He prayed that the state would take care of the latter as it did.
26. After the battle, the fleets were all decimated by follow up storms. A great deal of humanity was displayed in rescuing not only one's comrade, but the enemy survivor as well. Thousands of the enemies were saved by the British from certain death.
27. "After Trafalgar, the hero was no longer a man who behaved honorably in battle, but someone who did his duty who risked and even sacrificed his life for the service of his country. And as that definition of the heroic change, the status of hero opened up to people who weren't gentlemen. Heroism became a quality to which non-gents could aspire." "Nowadays, self-promotion and heroism are thought of as almost polar opposites. Any hint that a modern hero is looking for glory, in fact, disqualifies him. Heroic self-promotion is thought to be disgusting; in 1805 it was thought to be marvelous. Of course, officers in the British navy were handsomely rewarded for their victories." Again, perhaps because of the sheer violence displayed, as well as the rapid change going on during this period of time, I found this book fascinating. The violence at Trafalgar led to British domination of the seas and world trade for more than a hundred years. Many of our American ideals, morals, values, and so on are clearly displayed in this book.
28. "Three factors—preparation, imagination, and trust—were the three ingredients of the British victory, but none of them would have meant anything without a fourth: money."
29. "Three lessons on the exercise of power: 1) imperial power depends on political unity in the imperial state; 2) the imposition of power involves immense suffering. Empire sheds blood; 3) the exercise of power is, at the same time, the most horrible and beautiful of spectacles.

The book helped me to remember: 1) how fortunate we are to be living in the United States in these times, and 2) there is no success without 100% commitment. Time to "man up" and be happy about it! It's my duty after all.