British Royal Navy
and Its Indivisible Mastery of Seas
during Napoleonic Wars
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The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled--the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with her rotund flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests--and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith--the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change; captains, admirals, the dark "interlopers" of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned "generals" of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . .

The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

Joseph Conrad, “Heart of Darkness” (the description of Thames).
INTRODUCTION

The idea of creating the naval force in Great Britain appeared in the 9th century when there was a need to defend the country from the Vikings. In the beginning, the fleet was rather humble and nothing indicated its future supremacy. During the times of great geographical discoveries, it was one of the fleets financed by monarchs and supplementing privateering (see: Dyskant 2003: 22). It was king Henry V, who established a navy which consisted of 30 ships with the flag-ship *Trinite Royale* around the year 1416 while the merchant fleet consisted then of at least 250 ships. As Dyskant further asserts, the serious development and extension of the royal fleet started during the reign of Elisabeth I, owing to the money from piracy. Wealthy overseas Spanish properties allured such British privateers as captain Francis Drake or Thomas Cavendish, supported by the monarchy. The British Royal Navy had an opportunity to prove its might in 1588. The Spanish king Philip II decided to start a crusade and invade the proud and disobedient Albion using his great fleet known as “Armada Invincible” or “La Felicissima”. It consisted of 128 vessels (among them only 75 war ships) with 8,050 sailors, 2,088 oarsmen, 18,973 soldiers, over 1,545 noble volunteers and about 300 priests to converse Britain back to the “true faith”. Queen Elizabeth I had 197 vessels, (but only 34 of them were war ships and the rest - just armed merchant ships), the crews of 15,925 sailors and 1,540 soldiers. The British fleet was faster, better equipped, and easier to manoeuvre. The tactics were different too – the Spanish artillery had an additional function and everything was to be decided in a hand-to-hand fight, while British ships had orders to destroy the enemy from the distance, and so were they equipped (see: Dyskant 2003: 25-28). The great victory over the Spanish Armada was the beginning of the Royal Navy’s superiority. Constant naval struggles with countries like Holland or France let the Britons train and improve their fleet, though it had to endure a period of regression due to the lack of suitable financial support. Later, in the times of Oliver Cromwell, the fleet was organised, enlarged, classified into the ships-of-the-line, frigates, and light vessels - “lion whelps”, and a systematic naval education started. What improved as well, was discipline and leadership (see: Dyskant 2003: 29). Afterwards, the British Navy was constantly improving its vessels, tactics, organisation and armament, and growing into power, since as an insular nation, the Britons could feel relatively safe as long as the shores were guarded appropriately.

When Napoleon Bonaparte appeared on the European political scene, and aspired to defeat the British Empire, it was again the Royal Navy that frustrated his daring and not
entirely unjustified projects. In all probability, having much time after being exiled, this eminent military leader was wondering why the British “Wooden Walls” were so strong and invincible. Bonaparte was certainly not the only one who contemplated this phenomenon. Yet, after looking closer at the structure, composition, and organisation of the British Royal Navy along with the history of the world itself, some conclusions may be driven, and some assumptions of the basis of Albion’s mastery of the seas may be made. Of course, the Napoleonic Wars did not finish in 1805, after the battle of Trafalgar, but one can stop at this apogee of the British navy’s supremacy, and still have enough data to consider.
CHAPTER 1
The ones that manned Royal Navy

“They are sure to walk firm, where all other Creatures tumble.”
Ned Ward (Rediker 1987: 11)

“Seamen have always dwelt on the fringes of settled society. The Greeks hesitated whether to count them among the living or the dead, and 18th century Englishmen were not much better informed” (Rodger 1988: 15). However, it appears interesting to look closer at this anonymous and indistinguishable mass of people who made the sailing vessels live. Unfortunately, apart from officers, seamen did not write many memoirs or letters home, either due to being illiterate or thinking that nobody would be interested; for that reason, not much is known about their perception of the life in ships-of-war. The officers’ vision of ordinary seamen was often prejudiced and incomplete, so the right picture of them is not easy to recall. According to Howarth, a true portrait lies somewhere between “the Jolly Jack Tars, brave, patriotic and devil-may-care” and “the victims of a cruel system, press-ganged, starved, flogged and ill-treated to the verge of mutiny” (1969: 25). However hard it is to create a psychological sketch of an ordinary sailor in the service of the Royal Navy during Napoleonic Wars, some facts and recordings may help to imagine one.

1.1. Quota Men, volunteers and pressed seamen

Less than half of the seamen had been forced to the Navy by press-gangs, the rest were either volunteers or ‘quota men’. Pope explains that the Quota Acts were introduced in 1795 by the Prime Minister Pitt, and stated that every county, depending on its population and number of seaports, was obliged to appoint a quota of men that would join the Navy, (2004: 104). Seldom did it happen that there were enough volunteers, so magistrates were shortening the convicts’ sentences, providing they would ‘volunteer’. For many of them this alternative appeared to be equally painful, if not even worse. This was “a damned hard life, full of toil and strife” as an old song says (Rediker 1987: 14) – a real prison with an extra opportunity to drown. The Quota System thus appears to have been “flooding the Navy with scoundrels”, yet, what was even worse, it often brought typhus from city jails to healthy ships (see: Pope 2004: 105).

“The strength of the Navy, its nucleus, was its volunteers; not for nothing came the expression: ‘Better one volunteer than three pressed men’” (Pope 2004: 93). However, it was far from being easy to allure sailors to join the Royal Navy. Howarth says that if
someone decided to start a life at sea, he usually preferred the merchant navy because of
the better pay, or privateers, where the chance of capturing enemy merchant ships and
winning prize-money was greater than in the Royal Navy; when a British ship captured the
enemy’s vessel during the wartime, the Admiralty bought it from the crew and the prize-
money was divided among the men, (1969: 28). “In theory, the whole value of a captured
ship was distributed to the admiral commanding the station, and the officers and men of the
ship that captured it. The proportions were often varied by Acts of Parliament, and the
seamen’s share was small. Sometimes, a single happy fight could make a captain rich for
the rest of his life, and give each of his seamen about enough cash to get drunk on. But
still, prize-money was the dream of every man, and indeed it was the basis of most of the
navy’s tactics” (Howarth 1969: 31). The responsibility for manning his ship lied on the
captain. According to Pope, some captains needed not to worry, for their successful
reputation provided them with eager volunteers to join, (2004: 93). Less fortunate captains
often resorted to interesting and tempting advertisements, like the poster “(…) put by Lord
Cochrane, wanting men for the 36-gun Pallas frigate. It was headed ‘God Save the King’,
followed by ‘Doublons. Spanish Dollarbag consigned to Boney’, and began: ‘My lads, the
rest of the GALLEONS with the TREASURE from LE PLATA are waiting half-loaded in
CARTAGENA’” (Pope 2004: 93). The captains who anyhow did not manage to persuade
sailors to join their ships of war could always rely on the Impress Service, for whom the
seamen “did not have to be educated, or men who wanted to go to sea; they needed to have
all their limbs and most of their wits” (Pope 2004: 93).

The system of naval press groups was not unheard of as early as in the time of
feudalism; long before England had a standing Navy (see: Pope 2004: 97). A constantly
growing need for maritime rivalry with France and Spain along with the colonial
expansion maintained the significance of the Impress Service. According to Dyskant,
an average press-gang was led by a press-master, and consisted of a captain, two
lieutenants, four midshipmen and twenty soldiers, who were searching the coastal towns or
boarding the incoming merchant vessels and forcing men between 18 and 55 to join the
Royal Navy (2003: 129). Indeed, the merchant navy provided a good source of qualified
seamen for the press-gangs, who could capture any man they needed, apart from officers
and apprentices, as long as there were enough people left to navigate the ship. “The tactics
of resistance varied widely. Seamen waged portside riots; turned over press boats full of
‘recruits’, inflicted upon themselves disabilities, such as burning a wound with vitriol to
make it look like scurvy; and feigned every manner of paralysis, idiocy and fits” (Rediker
1987: 33). However, forcing men to join the Navy directly was not the only tactic adopted by the Impress Service. Pope reveals, that a recruiting officer was always in possession of the ‘King’s Shilling’ and if he managed to convey the coin into the hands of an unsuspecting civilian, the latter was automatically claimed to have accepted the King’s pay for joining the Navy, no matter how resistant might he appear, (2004: 96-97). There were many ways of relocating the shilling, one of which was dropping it into a potential victim’s beer, so that the man ‘accepted’ it while grasping his tankard. “A wise landlord, not anxious to see his customers hauled of to fight the King’s enemies in distant parts, provided glass-bottomed tankards, so that the wary drinker could peer into it to see if a shilling was lurking at the bottom, ready to change him from a toper to a trooper as the recruiting sergeant’s hand tapped his shoulder” (Pope 2004: 97). What characterised a good recruitment officer, apart from cunning and rapidity, was an exceptional, alert eye which helped him to notice and distinguish immediately any man ‘using the sea’, that is the impeccable candidate for the Royal Navy. Pope gives evidence of that shrewdness by disclosing a story of Robert Hay, who served in the Navy for 8 years and deserted after his ship was wrecked in a storm in the Plymouth Harbour (2004: 117-119). To avoid impressments, he bought a long coat, breeches and other garment that would alter his appearance into more ‘land-like’ (sailors wore trousers with wide bottoms, easily rolled up while working on board; only officers wore breeches). Despite all those efforts, Hay was stopped by a press-gang in London and was not able to deceive the officer that he had nothing in common with ships. “The palms of his hands showed he was used to hard work and were ‘perhaps a little discoloured with tar’” (Pope 2004: 119). It happened, that ordinary people were eager to help the Impress Service and informed them (usually for a pound of reward) whenever they noticed a man that seemed to have ‘used the sea’. This was called “a game of ‘hunt-the-sailor’, which involved keeping a weather eye open for a man wearing trousers or looking uncomfortable in breeches and coat, a man who walked with a roll and seemed to have blisters on his heels through being unused to wearing shoes” (Pope 2004: 124). Nevertheless, the Impress Service was nothing of a liked institution. If the Royal Navy was not facing an extremely urgent need of seamen, press-gangs were prone to corruption, which saved many civilians from serving the Crown. If bribery did not work, furious families of the newly pressed men, or simply dissatisfied citizens could even attack a press-gang, as one of its members, Spavens, described: “Several hundreds of old men, women and boys flocked after us, well provided with stones, and brickbats, and commenced a general attack; but not wishing to hurt them, we
fired our pistols over their heads, in order to deter them from further outrage; but the women proved very daring, and followed us down to low water mark, being almost up to the knees in mud” (Pope 2004: 128).

Describing age and nationality of ordinary sailors, Howarth gives some data of the crew of Victory - Admiral Nelson’s ship-of-war; the average age was 22 and there were not many men above 40 (1969: 25). “They were preponderantly English: 452 Englishmen, 74 Irish, 72 Scots, 24 Welshmen, 28 Americans and 53 assorted foreigners – men from almost every country in Europe, including France, and from India, Africa and the Caribbean”.

1.2. Ratings and duties

Once signed on to the ship’s book, a man was given a rating according to his experience. As stated in http://www.napoleonicguide.com, people who had never served in a ship before were classified as landsmen, those with limited practice were ordinary seamen and experienced sailors were known as able seamen who had an opportunity to get promotion to higher posts. Pope depicts that there were several Petty or Warrant Officers on a ship-of-the-line in the end of the 18th century (2004: 83-87). For instance, mast captain, gunner’s mates, quartermaster, master-at-arms (the ship’s chief of police, exercising seamen with pistols and muskets), or carpenter. Also the bosun had a significant role (he was in charge of actual rigging, cables, anchors, sails and boats. Together with his mates, he assisted the watch and was responsible for keeping the ship working with as little confusion as possible. His mates, called ‘the Spithead Nightingales’ passed the orders to the accompaniment of the shrill notes of the bosun’s call, wrongly named on shore as ‘a bosun’s whistle’ (see: Pope 2004: 84-85). The ship’s master navigated the ship, controlled how the rigging was set up and supervised placing the ballast appropriately – if there was too much load on the bow, the ship would be difficult to handle, and if the stern was overweight, the vessel would sail slower. Cooper, sail-maker, gunner (a king of the powder room who could destroy the ship in a minute), chaplain (only on the largest ships) and surgeon were also present in the ship of war (see: Pope 2004: 83-87 and http://www.napoleonicguide.com/navy_crews.htm).

As far as officers are concerned, midshipmen helped the lieutenants in controlling over the crew and occasionally could take command of small boats or prizes, as it is further described in http://www.napoleonicguide.com. Lieutenants – ‘the backbone of a vessel’s command structure’ - could expect a regular half-pay income in case of being put in reserve by the Admiralty and depending on the rating of a ship, there could be up to six of
them on board. Their tasks were to command small boats, gun divisions in battle, or oversee a watch and lead dangerous boarding. Commander was the next rank from lieutenant – he was a captain with all privileges and obligations but lacked only an official title (see: http://www.napoleonguide.com/navy_crews.htm). The captain in a ship, as the absolute ruler, was responsible for the crew, their number, interests, readiness for service, and for the vessel itself. His promotion to an admiral was somewhat automatic and depended upon seniority that was based on the date of commission. If he stayed alive long enough, he passed three stages of rear-admiral, three stages of vice-admiral and two of admiral, therefore “As one naval officer commented, ‘Death is the life of promotion’” (Pope 2004: 79). A commodore was a captain nominated temporarily to take charge of a detached naval squadron. An admiral if went to the sea, his flagship was usually that of the fleet’s junior captain (http://www.napoleonicguide.com).

On the word of Howarth, about two-thirds of the crew were watchkeepers (1969: 30). There were ships that, kept three, but most vessels kept two watches, and that meant four hours on and four hours off. The rest of the seamen were called “idlers” who could sleep all night and work during the day (among them the mentioned earlier Petty Officers). These were clerks of the officers, stewards, servants, cooks, sail-makers, rope-makers, cooperers, tailors, carpenters, signalmen, barbers, signalmen or gunners. The decks were never quiet and still. The watchkeepers were woken up about 4 a.m. with traditional curses and shouts of the bosun’s mates; the capstan, the weighty soaked anchor cables, the pumps or the guns had to be manned as well as the sails, the wheel and rigging on the upper deck. The ‘look-outs’ - the seamen observing the horizon with telescopes (known as ‘bring ’em near’), whose place has been taken by modern radars, had to be cautious and awake, therefore they were hailed every fifteen minutes by the officer of the watch – especially at night (see: Pope 2004: 191). Those sailors who were lucky enough to have finished the watch, were clambering up the hammocks not dressing off to save time and be ready to fight anytime at night. If it was raining, the beddings seldom had a chance to dry as well as their owners, because the only source of warmth was the galley. It, in turn, was “never lit until daylight because in wartime every one of the King’s ships at sea met the dawn at quarters, ready in case daylight revealed an enemy ship in sight. The galley fire had to be out because of the danger of fire from random shot and the risk of explosions if there was gunpowder on deck” (Pope 2004: 192). One of the sacred sailors’ traditions was scrubbing and holystoning the decks. Usually the upper deck was scrubbed every morning, and holystoned twice a week; the lower decks were not cleaned that often. Pope illustrates a
holystone as “a block of Portland stone the size of a large pillow”, which was pulled back and forth by two men along the deck covered with sand and water, so that the planking was scoured like with sandpaper (although very effective, it could not be used too often, for the wooden planks were wearing down), (2004: 167). Wherever there was no place for a large holystone, a sailor worked a stone the size of a ‘family Bible’ and scoured the deck on his knees. Before the dawn the boatswain’s mates blew to lash up all hammocks that next were stored in nets along the bulwarks on the upper deck to let the fresh air operate on them and to serve as a kind of protection from splinters and musketry during the battle. Comfort and solitude were seldom to be found in a ship with a crew of 700 men. The vessels were built to function as war machines, and the primary aim of seamen serving the Crown was to be ready as fast as possible to confront the enemy and be able to defeat them (see: Howarth 1969: 30). That is why British commanders were so devoted to constant practicing and preparing their ships to battle in the blink of an eye.

“An efficient ship could always be cleared in six minutes,” – to provide a place for working the guns along with removing everything that could produce splinters – “the gunports opened, powder brought up from the magazines and shot from the lockers, the guns loaded and run out and ready to fire. And in that process any personal property lying around would certainly have gone through the ports and into the sea. Men learnt to be tidy, and if they had private possessions, they learnt not to value them too highly” (Howarth 1969: 30). Pope claims, that “Any of the King’s ships at sea was run ‘by the watch’: with the chance of an enemy sail coming over the horizon any moment of the day or night, minutes counted in carrying out most orders concerning sail handling and preparing for action. Starting with the topmen on deck, they would be up the ratlines and out on the main royal yards in one minute, with thirty seconds allowed for casting off the gaskets, the canvas strips holding the sail in a great roll against the yard. Most ships could set all sail in from four to six minutes” (2004: 198).

Working high in the rigging in bad weather ended for many sailors with falling because of the rolling of the ship and strong winds; Pope says, that a few decades after the Napoleonic Wars finished, one Mediterranean fleet ship had one casualty a month (2004: 198).

On Sundays the captain conducted detailed inspections, and the divine service, if the ship lacked the chaplain, or read the thirty-six Articles of War. Singing was the part of the service that the seamen liked the most. “Many good captains regarded the men’s singing as the best barometer available – happy and contented men sang hymns with gusto; sulky or bullied men put little life into it” (Pope 2004: 196). Also a close observation of the mess book’s recordings helped a captain to notice problems among his sailors. There were mess groups of six or eight men eating and living close to one another, and every man could change his mess at the beginning of the month, which was written down in the book. “If men changed frequently (…) it indicated an unhappy ship, unless it was the same man
changing each time, in which case the mess book provided a list of the ship’s
troublemakers – men who were unpopular with their own shipmates” (Pope 2004: 159).

A ship-of-war could be sailed with a tenth of the number of men that in fact the
crew was comprised of. The rest was indispensable only in the case of a battle to serve the
guns, resist boarders or act as them, take care of the wounded, fix urgent damages, serve
the pumps if the hull was leaking, and yet sail the ship (see: Howarth 1969: 31). The Royal
Marines (called by sailors “the royal jollies” while all the other embarked soldiers were
dubbed “tame jollies”) in Nelson’s times were an important part of each war ship’s crew –
a ship-of-the-line had a squad of 125 of them. On the word of Dyskant, at the end of the
18th century the Marines were divided to the Royal Marine Light Infantry (RMLI), and
Royal Marine Artillery (RMA) that helped to serve the ship’s artillery – the carronade
(2003: 129-130). The role of RMLI was more complex – during the battle they took part in
boarding, watched the crew not to abandon positions, and their snipers hidden aloft were
focusing on particularly important targets, otherwise, the soldiers were securing the vessels
while stationing in harbours and anchorages. They could also act as a landing-party or
simply help commanding the ship – punish the mutineers and make sure that the crew
observe the rules. The Marines in general were armed with rifles with bayonets, cutlasses
or choppers sometimes but their uniforms differed. RMLI wore red frock coats with black
cuffs and collars, white trousers, gaiters, black shoes and hats. The RMA uniforms
consisted of green or blue frock coats with red collars and cuffs, stripped white and blue
trousers, black hats and shoes (see: Dyskant 2003: 229).

1.3. A sailor – his appearance, and everyday life in a ship-of-war

Ordinary seamen were easy to recognise due to their outer look, way of moving and
talking. Their language was a mixture of technical forms, swearing, unusual syntax and
pronunciation. The clothing of ordinary seamen was highly distinctive and practical.
Nothing of sophistication could be noticed in it. Years of harsh seamen life and the
necessity of frequent sails repairs trained the men to operate needle and thread. Therefore
sailors were often capable of sewing clothes for themselves and so they did if they had to.
As Rediker describes, the trousers of a seaman were wide, ample and sack-like, cut a bit
over the ankle, which allowed tucking them quickly and being immediately ready to
holystone the deck for instance (1987: 11). The fabric used for seaman’s trousers had to be
durable and provide protection against cold together with piercing wetness. A heavy,
rough, sometimes tarred nap assured this protection. A sailor wore also a checked or
stripped shirt, a jacket and stockings. To protect the head he wore a cap, but due to severe weather conditions, this piece of garment was often reported to have gone with the wind. Shoes were quite unpopular among ordinary seamen if it was not cold. Bare feet were flexible and more convenient while walking on an unstable deck, or high above it, swinging in the rigging. Only the gunpowder storage had to be entered barefoot or wearing special flannel boots (see: Pope 2004: 60), so as not to cause a spark.

Rediker states that a sailor’s body carried many traces of his long-lasting struggle with difficulties found in a ship at sea (1987: 12). A weather-beaten, prematurely wrinkled face was one of the mildest evidence of them. Hands and soles were covered with splinters, and coarse owing to constant work with thick ship ropes, and necessity of climbing them up and sliding down. The service in a ship-of-war marked people with various scars and injuries as burnings, shootings or wounds. Apart from them, some sailors had their forearms or other parts of body covered with tattoos. Those drawings were made by “pricking the skin, and rubbing in a pigment” – was it the ink or gunpowder. All the signs made sailors recognisable “much to the delight of the press gangs that combed the port towns in search of seamen to serve the Crown” (see: Rediker 1987: 12).

According to Howarth, the junior officers and the senior ratings lived on the orlop deck - the lowest deck above the hold, while the lower gun deck was occupied by almost all the rest of the crew (1969: 29). Sailors used to sleep in hammocks hung fourteen inches apart, but naturally it seldom happened that more than half of the crew could sleep at the same time, and thus the resting ones could occupy extra space. The decks were dark, stuffy and damp, for the light and fresh air were coming only through the gratings or gun ports opened during the battle or practice. Otherwise sailors had to live by candles and lanterns. Admirals and captains had obviously different conditions on a ship. Their furnished, decorated, bright and stylish cabins designed with elegance and taste, were of a great contrast to the gun decks (see: Howarth 1969: 34). Meals were eaten on the same deck at mess-tables slung from the beams above. The food that was served to officers on ships-of-war differed greatly from the one consumed by the crew only shortly after supply. Admiral’s breakfast could consist then of tea, hot rolls, toast and cold tongue, dinner - of three courses, fruits for desert, coffee, liqueurs and finest wine and after 8 p.m. a rummer of punch with a cake or biscuits (see: Howarth 1969: 35). If a ship had to sail for about three months, the rations – salt beef and biscuits, were alike for everyone. What is more, the contractors who supplied the Navy with provisions were often dishonest and sold less meat pieces than was agreed; unfortunately, the casks with food were shut before the ship’s
purser could check whether everything was satisfactory. The meat was very often not fresh, or soft, but very salty, which enabled to store it longer (see: Pope 2004: 89). Seamen got also beer, salt pork, pease, and oatmeal at least twice a week, not to mention sauerkraut, which was scorned for its smell, but valued as a protection against scurvy (see: Pope 2004: 150-151, 160). A vivid and evocative description of inconveniences on a ship blockading Brest was given by Bernard Coleridge, who was 11 at that time:

Indeed we live on beef which has been ten or eleven years in corn and on biscuit which quite makes your throat cold in eating it owing to the maggots which are very cold when you eat them, like calves-foot jelly or blomonge being very fat indeed. (…) We drink water of the colour of the bark of a pear-tree with plenty of little maggots and weavils in it and wine which is exactly like bullock’s blood and sawdust mixed together (Howarth 1969: 21).

Seamen sometimes got cheese as well, and after some time it was becoming so hard that it could be used to produce buttons (see: Pope 2004: 155). Till 1740 British seamen were given 1 pint of pure Jamaican rum as an antidote for everything (young boys were given half of it), nevertheless, this generosity appeared to be too tempting and caused huge problem of drunkenness. Admiral Edward Vernon, the commander of the North Sea Fleet in 1740s, fought furiously with this disease of his men and ordered to dilute rum with a quart of water and then distribute it twice a day. Vernon was known as “Old Grogram” (due to grogram - the fabric of his trousers), and so the new drink associated with him got the name “grog” and had not changed till 1824 (see: Dyskant 2003: 50).

“In the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which lasted with a short break for twenty-two years, the Royal Navy lost 1,875 killed in the six major and four minor battles fought by its fleets and four by its squadrons, compared with more than 72,000 who died from disease or accident on board and another 13,600 who died in ships lost by accident or weather” (Pope 2004: 131). In 1799, out of the 646 Royal Navy ships in service only about 400 were proud of surgeons, and the rest had surgeons’ mates. Weighty loads carrying could distort seaman’s figure or cause various illnesses including hernia – very little understood by surgeons. Scurvy, generated by the lack of vitamins in a seaman’s poor diet, was one of the major threat in ships-of-war along with rheumatism, dysentery, typhus, various inflammations or yellow fever (see: Pope 2004: 131-137). The crowded, badly warmed and aired ship was an ideal environment for an epidemic. The 18th century medicine was far from being precise, and much treating was based on observations and common sense rather than on research. For instance, it was observed that onions or lemon juice protected from scurvy and ‘smelling the land air’ in the tropics was unhealthy, but nothing was known about vitamins nor about mosquitoes that were the source of disease.
CHAPTER 2
Royal Navy and its leadership

“The captain had to be father and confessor, judge and jury, to his men.”
Pope (2004: 62)

And yet, in all these circumstances, something like a miracle was achieved. The fleet was manned by thousands and thousands of ignorant uneducated men. Half of them had no wish to be where they were. Perhaps a sixth were beggars and convicts. They were herded in a confinement worse than prison with nothing constructive to do. And they became the most excellent navy the world had ever seen. Partly this was done by iron-hard discipline. But discipline could not have been enough. There had to be leadership too, and the leadership was brilliant (Howarth 1969: 32).

Ordinary seamen - the real ‘flesh and bones’ of the Royal Navy, but such body would never function appropriately without a good head. Considering the probable reasons of the Royal Navy’s indisputable invincibleness in the time of Napoleonic Wars, it is inconceivable not to mention its leaders.

2.1. Admiralty

The organised and coherent work of the British Royal Navy would not be possible, if it had not been for one, centralised, supervising institution – the Admiralty, located in London. Pope describes that many decisions were made by the Board of Admiralty, though all its members rarely met together (2004: 22-24). Important questions were usually discussed by four members, for many documents of a great magnitude required at least three signatures, but the every-day matters were generally decided by the First Lord (often a politician), or the ‘senior or first professional lord’, a naval officer, working with the Board Secretary. The latter also supervised the movement of the Royal Navy ships on home and foreign stations and gave any necessary orders ‘to the admirals, captains and commanding officers of ships on service’. His other tasks included distributing seamen and marines, equipping all ships, and promotions. The second professional lord would deal with all the documentation of the Navy Board, the Transport, Victualling, Sick and Hurt Boards and Greenwich Hospital, while the third professional lord (...) would – with the First Lord’s approval – deal with the promotion of commission and warrant officers who were without ships because of shipwreck or seniority (Pope 2004: 24-25).

There were also the civil lords and clerks who assisted the Board, and were responsible for the Admiralty funds or distribution of the correspondence, for instance. Yet, the Admiralty was not free from corruption and frauds – Pope gives examples of men who had sinecures in Jamaica, Barbados, and other distant places along with Admiralty in London at one time; spending their lives in England, they received their full pay (2004: 27). To imagine the dimension of irregularities, it is essential to mention Henry Dundas;
In 1801, “a few weeks before Pitt resigned, the Right Honourable Henry Dundas, Member of Parliament for Edinburgh City, Secretary of State for the War Department, Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, a Lord of Trade and Plantations, First Commissioner for the Affairs of India, Lord Privy Seal in Scotland, Governor of the Bank of Scotland (salary undisclosed), an Elder Brother of Trinity House, Treasurer of the Navy, and holder of various other posts, including that of President of the Society for the Relief of Ruptured Poor, was officially paid a total of £11,000 a year from public funds for political offices. To give an idea of how much this was in those days, he could have used the money to buy himself a new 32-guns frigate each year.” What was even worse, “Dundas, later Lord Melville, had an influence over Pitt which was almost disastrous; most of the catastrophic expeditions embarked upon the Army and Navy began in Dundas’s head, the ideas brewed and stewed by drink” (Pope 2004: 252,260).

Apart from corruption, communication was one of the Admiralty’s main problems, for it could take months to deliver urgent orders to some remote station somewhere in the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean (see: Pope 2004: 30-31). To avoid being captured by the enemy or lost in a storm, the letters were sent in several copies carried by different ships, however, the situation could change utterly before the dispatch reached its destination. The communication in Britain was not that difficult, for there were many telegraph-towers built along the way from London to major harbours. Observing one another, the signal-officers passed the instructions in either direction, and the signal-towers’ location (by the sea) enabled them to receive messages from passing ships as well. Pope claims also that “It was the boast in Plymouth that a short message could be sent to the Admiralty and a reply received in fifteen minutes” (2004: 30-31).

2.2. Captain

As Dyskant describes, since Cromwell’s time, the British fleet had been traditionally divided into three squadrons named after colours of flags they were allotted – the White (the vanguard), the Red (the central guard), and the Blue (the rearguard) (2003: 49). Each squadron was split into three divisions, commanded by an admiral, a vice admiral and a rear admiral. In the 18th century the Admiralty started to allocate some squads created if there was a need of a special mission. Later, the squads were established for good and ascribed particular harbours to station in. Those large squadrons, called “The Fleets”, were given names after their place of stationing - “The Mediterranean Fleet” with the base in Gibraltar, “The Channel Fleet” with the base in Spithead, and “The Northern Fleet”, stationing in Yarmouth (see: Dyskant 2003: 49-50). Those divisions together with the vast size of Royal Navy itself required a great number of commanding officers.

An average naval captain belonged to the gentry, and he was usually a country squire from the south of England, not an aristocrat, for they went into the army. As
Howarth writes, people from lower classes could become boatswains, masters-at-arms or eventually ships’ masters (1969: 36-37). Seldom did it happen that someone from the lower class managed to reach a commanding post, but if he did, it was not an easy task. The crew preferred to be commanded by a gentleman and despised captains of lower origin. “The crew of one frigate protested against their captain’s cruelty: and one of their complaints was that he was the son of a barber” (Howarth 1969: 37). To start a trip up the ladder of ranks in the Navy, a boy had to win a captain’s patronage. That enabled the continuation of an exclusive British tradition and maintained the dominance of the southern squires in the Royal Navy. Consequently, some officers serving the Crown were utterly inappropriate men to do it, and only their relatives’ or friends’ influence enabled them to keep the position, no matter what their skills were. It may appear somewhat unfair, yet “It is pointless speculating what would have happened had Nelson not eventually received rapid promotion, so that he was in position to win his three great and decisive battles, the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar (for more details see: Chapter 4), but without the influence of his uncle it is unlikely that he would ever become a captain, and without the influence of Earl St Vincent (…) he would never had been given the command of the ships that led to the victory at the Nile” (Pope 2004: 29).

Becoming a captain meant being responsible for the whole ship – her men, work and organisation. It also meant loneliness;

Unless he invited officers – which he could not do too frequently – he ate every meal alone; when he walked the quarterdeck, the officers and men left the windward side clear for him. He was the captain; no one joked with him, no one chatted, always there was an invisible wall between him and his officers, a wall which represented discipline but one that shut out the captain. It was a wall which vanished the moment a captain tried to make himself popular, currying favour among his subordinates. From then on he was no longer the captain; he was an object of derision among the men he was supposed to lead (Pope 2004: 63).

The specific kind of loneliness in a ship together with several hundreds of men gave grounds to various alterations in character. Pope further describes that captains often abused alcohol, became introverts, religious fanatics, or were dominated by obsessions of various kind – from wanting the deck to be scrubbed six times a day, (or having eccentric ideas – like one captain of the Harlequin frigate had his boat’s crew dressed as harlequins – Pope (2004: 164)) to keeping a tyrannical discipline which ended in sadism.

“A captain at sea was a king of his domain, and did very much as he pleased. (…) There were happy ships and ships where life was hell” (Howarth 1969: 33). Keeping all the crew in obedience was virtually impossible without an iron-hard discipline. Weekly
reminded rules and threats of severe punishments were to prevent seamen from insubordination, but the intensity and dimension of penalties depended on the captain. A well known constituent of the master’s authority was the cat of nine tails – a whip of nine cords each of 46 cm with three knots, bound to a piece of rope as a handle. According to Dyskant (2003: 146, and Rediker 1987: 212), flogging was the most popular punishment for all minor offences, beginning with drunkenness, using the wrong cloth to make a sail, loosing an oar, irregular steering or sleeping on a watch, and finishing on not saluting an officer, or robbing his mates. A captain was allowed to order ultimately 12 lashes on bare back, but this was often disobeyed though only the court martial could impose more. It was believed that a good seaman could stand 4 dozens of lashes, without harm to his health. More serious offences such as cowardice, mutiny, desertion, hitting an officer, refusing to execute an order for the second time, sodomy, murder of a shipmate, blasphemy or even firing a cannon too soon were usually punished with death. That was done by hanging from the yardarm, dragging under the keel of a ship, drowning or other gruesome rituals. Sometimes the death penalty could be changed to the so called “flogging round the fleet” described by Dyskant (2003: 147). The accused man was bound to the grating stuck vertically on a pinnace and taken from one ship of a squadron to another, getting there a part of the punishment meted out – theoretically 12 lashes. A doctor or surgeon sitting in the boat decided whether the man would survive further thrashing or not. Whole crews had to observe the beatings and marines’ drummers beat ‘the Rogue’s March’. If the convict happened to survive the flogging, the surgeon bathed his wounds with rum and sea water and directed him to the hospital. It was more frequent, however, that the flogging ended in death of the offender (Dyskant 2003: 147).

2.3. Mutinies

The iron-hard discipline, captain’s cruelty, insincerity, and frauds or any other problems together with total helplessness of ordinary seamen caused humiliation, frustration and occasionally drove to suicidal thoughts and attempts. “The captain’s power was not unlimited, for the vice-admiralty courts occasionally punished a brutal master. But the largely unchecked nature of the captain’s legal powers cannot be denied” (Rediker 1987: 213). Despite severe law and the irrefutable death penalty for rebellion, mutinies happened. Two of the most famous were the mutiny at Spithead (16.04 – 15.05.1797) and at the Nore (12.05-13.06.1797) (see: www.napoleonicguide.com.uk). The first was caused by the Admiralty’s constant disregard for the sailors’ humiliating conditions and low
wages. After two weeks of negotiations, the seamen handled themselves peacefully and avoided reprisal. Better living conditions and pay rise were granted to them, which possibly appeared to be a good sign for other dissatisfied, feeling forlorn and often desperate sailors. The mutiny at the Nore led by a former officer Richard Parker, was much more serious, involving 24 ships-of-the-line. The rebels murdered some loathed officers and threatened blockading London along with starving it, and there were even projects of sailing to French harbours which meant betrayal.

Here are Eight Articles of Demand presented to Admiral Buckner by the Nore mutineers. It should be noted that the Admiralty received them and immediately rejected them. The official reply being "All that could reasonably be expected by the seamen and marines has already been granted them. Their Lordships cannot accede any further requests."

**Article 1**
That every indulgence granted to the fleet at Portsmouth (Spithead) be granted to His Majesty's subjects serving in the Fleet at the Nore and places adjacent.

**Article 2**
That every man, upon a ship's coming into harbour (a certain number at a time so as not to injure the ship's duty) to go and see their friends and families; a convenient time to be allowed to each man.

**Article 3**
That all ships before they go to sea shall be paid all arrears of wages down to six months, according to the old rules.

**Article 4**
That no officer that has been turned down by any of His Majesty's ships shall be employed in the same ship again without consent of the ship's company.

**Article 5**
That when any of His Majesty's ships shall be paid, that may have been some time in commission, if there are any pressed men on board, that may not be in the regular course of payment, they shall receive two months advance to furnish them with necessaries.

**Article 6**
That an indemnification be made any men who have run and may now be in His Majesty's naval service and that they not be liable to be taken up as deserters.

**Article 7**
That a more equal distribution be made of prize money to the crews of His Majesty's ships and vessels of war.

**Article 8**
That the articles of war, as now enforced, require various alterations, several of which to be expunged therefore; and if more moderate ones were held forth to seamen in general, it would be the means of taking off that terror and prejudice against His Majesty's service, on that account frequently imbibed by seamen from entering voluntarily into service. The Committee of Delegates of the whole fleet assembled in council on board HMS Sandwich have unanimously agreed that they will not deliver up their charge until the appearance of some of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to ratify the same.

**Given on board HMS Sandwich by the delegates of the fleet, 20 May, 1797.**

(www.napoleonicguide.com.uk)

Deprived of food and water supplies, the mutineers had finally to renounce. After a short trial, Parker and his leading co-conspirators were hanged for piracy and treason. Other major offenders were either imprisoned or flogged. However, those events served as a warning and a lesson for the Admiralty and were not easily forgotten, and the commanders that were at sea in 1805 were different from their inconsiderate and despotic precursors who sparked the mutinies. “They were still autocrats, but on the whole they
were thoughtful for their people. None of the active admirals would have tolerated the tyranny of the generation before them. They had tyrants’ powers and most of them used them wisely, and so they were doubly strong” (Howarth 1969: 38). The Spithead and Nore mutineers’ demands and claims that the sailors were ready to die for, seem now to be derisorily humble. As a matter of fact, the rioters did not want the punishments to be abandoned, or laws of the navy changed. They simply protested against unfair use of them.

2.4. Outstanding leadership

There were hundreds of commanders in the Royal Navy – brutal, unfair, unscrupulous, and insensitive or calm, conscientious and understanding. It is unachievable to examine all those personalities. Nonetheless, there were two distinctive, remarkable, and diverse leaders whose individualities it is worth to study a bit closer; Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood (see: Fig.1.) and Admiral Horatio Nelson (see: Fig.2.).

Fig. 1. Cuthbert Collingwood

Fig. 2. Horatio Nelson

2.4.1. “Old Cuddy”

“Cuthbert Collingwood was a strange kind of man to be an admiral. He was conscientious, capable, shrewd and unquestionably brave: as a strategist he always seemed to know better than anyone else what the French intended to do. But he was also scholarly, pedantic, puritan and dour – at the age of 55, a fatherly or even grandfatherly figure in the fleet. He made a good admiral, but he might have made a better bishop” (Howarth 1969: 57). As Howarth further describes, Admiral Collingwood started his sea odyssey at the age of 11 and for forty-four years he had spent only six ashore. “It was not that he wanted to; on the contrary, he was married and had two daughters and always longed to go home and become a normal family man. Only an overpowering sense of duty kept him sailing” (Howarth 1969: 57). Being a strict and austere commander, Collingwood was respected by his seamen, as stated by Howarth, for his just character did not approve any kind of humiliation. Only as being a young captain, did he order physical punishments to teach his sailors obedience, responsibility, temperance and honesty. Later, he changed his onboard tactics and replaced flogging with severe discipline, including watering the offenders’ grog or imposing extra duties along with endless moral lectures. Collingwood admitted “I cannot for the life of me comprehend the religion of an officer who could pray all one day
and flog his men all the next” (Howarth 1969: 58). His academic character and practices contributed to mental torment of the sailors who would often prefer a dozen lashes to one look of disgruntlement. “When he was out of earshot, young midshipmen sometimes laughed at him, but always half in awe and half in affection; one of them (…) remembered that they called him Old Cuddy” (Howarth 1969: 59). Harsh discipline and strictness combined with endless trainings gave in the end astonishing results. As stated by Dyskant, Collingwood’s flagship Royal Sovereign at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 fired a broadside in every 1 minute and 10 seconds, while the other British vessels – on the average needed 1 minute 40 seconds, not to mention the Spanish fleet, for instance, who needed as much as 5 minutes (2003: 243, 286). In other words, ‘Old Cuddy’ was over four times faster than the enemy (Pope claims that his artillery recorded even three broadsides in 90 seconds (2004: 199)). Nonetheless, to serve under Collingwood’s orders was far from being a pleasant and unchallenging task.

Admiral Collingwood was a loner (his favourite comrade onboard was a dog named Bounce) of sombre attitude to life and vast sense of responsibility. The captains who joined him while blockading French harbours in 1793 were surprised not to be invited to the flagship. What is more, they were deterred from visiting one another, and deprived from any opportunity of amusement. “They felt resentful. Brest and Toulon had been boring enough, but this was more frustrating. (…) Collingwood was absorbed in the details of administration, and the importance of keeping watch on the French, and he had no time for sociable frivolity” (Howarth 1969: 62). Loneliness, exhausting routine of hundreds of days alike, no access to friends seen in hailing distance and nearly no perspective of any improvement could evoke resignation and depression. Captain Codrington, wrote to his wife that there was very little content both among the officers and the crews. “For charity’s sake, send us Lord Nelson, oh ye men of power!” (Howarth 1969: 64).

2.4.2. Lord Nelson

Horatio Nelson – being a “small, narrow-chested, fretful” child “with a whining voice” (Pope 2004: 63) informed his family, living in Norfolk, that he wanted to become a naval officer. Taking into account all the harshness of the life at sea, and the boy’s weak health, Nelson’s uncle – Captain Suckling was rather sceptical about it. He even wrote a letter to his family, saying that such a fragile boy must have caused lots of troubles if they punished him with such a cruel future. Using his black, English sense of humour, Suckling joked even that maybe a gunshot would tear his head off during a first naval battle, and
there would be no problem anymore (see: Hibbert 2001: 17-18). The uncle however took care of Horatio, whose naval adventure began at the age of 12. If there was any obligatory medical examination for midshipmen, Nelson would probably be the last to pass it. Prone to seasickness and not strong enough to resist many illnesses as malaria for instance, the young officer spent many days recovering from them, below the deck. On the other hand, he was extremely lively, and showed great courage, proved during a polar expedition that he participated in at the age of 15. According to Hibbert, while his ship was immobilised by floes, Nelson with another midshipman went ashore to hunt a polar bear (2001: 22-23). At dawn, the captain noticed the two boys attacking a huge animal, and immediately ordered them to come back. Yet, Nelson did not react to it and continued his attack, which could have tragic consequences, for the ammunition finished. He however stayed calm and ensured his terrified companion that he would kill the animal, using the butt-end of his musket, and bring the bear’s fur to his father. Fortunately, Captain Lutwige ordered to fire a gun, which scared the bear and saved the midshipmen (see: Hibbert 2001: 23). It was only one of many times when Nelson disregarded orders, and surprisingly, these were the events that granted him with fame which he loved so much (for more details see: Chapter 4). Gaining experience in naval tactics, and learning to live at sea, Nelson gradually promoted, to start his real career along with Napoleon. As Howarth claims, Nelson became a legend among the British sailors (1969: 77); his passionate devotion to England, courage, and naval skills together with “The bravery, clear thinking, understanding, and the sudden unpremeditated kindness” (Howarth 1969: 70) stunned ordinary seamen, and made them love him. There were many stories of Nelson’s supportive responses to people’s needs, circling around the fleet, as the one of his lieutenants – Pasco. The Admiral found him once, looking annoyed, and asked of the purpose; it appeared that the boatswain responsible for loading the mailbags, had forgotten to put Pasco’s letter to his wife there, and the ship carrying the mail was already under full sail, some distance off. Nelson ordered to hoist a signal and bring her back. “‘Who knows that he may not fall in action tomorrow?’ And the ship returned, and hove to while a boat was launched to carry the single letter” (Howarth 1969: 78). Such stories made the men having a vast fondness for Nelson, for he was able to balance discipline and kindness, setting a high standard for any other admiral. “Men adored him, (…) and in fighting under him, every man thought himself sure of success” (Howarth 1969: 79). “There was also his unquestioning assumption that any captain and crew of a British ship-of-the-line would fight and beat whatever enemy ship they met. From the victories in the past, all the captains had
confidence in Nelson: the confidence he showed in them made them also confident of themselves and of each other” (Howarth 1969: 74). Preparing to a major battle (that appeared to be the one at Trafalgar), Nelson invented a revolutionary plan (for more details see: Chapter 4), which he revealed to his captains, having them dine with him in his flagship 

**Victory.** Howarth calls it ‘a blend of authority and friendship’ which made all those commanders accept it utterly (1969: 74). Admiral himself wrote, that “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! You are, my Lord, surrounded by friends whom you inspire with confidence” (Howarth 1969: 71). Although his men indisputably adored him, Nelson was a controversial figure mainly for his boyish vanity, and, despite being already married, his scandalous love affair with Lady Emma Hamilton. The British government did not approve the admiral’s personal life to a great extent; writing his testament before Trafalgar, Nelson asked Britain to take care of his beloved (Emma and their daughter – Horatia), since he staked his own life to defend the country. His motherland however ignored Nelson’s last will, and refused Emma any pension after his death, which condemned her to living in poverty, and finally die in shame, after escaping from prison where she was sentenced for debts (see: Dyskant 2003: 326).

Admiral Nelson’s death at Trafalgar in 1805 shaded this glorious victory over France and Spain, and the whole nation was overwhelmed with sorrow. His seamen were reported to have fought like devils, and after his death, cried like children (see: Hibbert 2001: 361).
CHAPTER 3
Wooden Walls of the Royal Navy

Wherever we want to go, we’ll go. That’s what a ship is, you know. It’s not just a keel and a hull and a deck and sails, that’s what a ship needs but what a ship is... what the ‘Black Pearl’ really is... is freedom.
Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow, in “Pirates of the Caribbean”.

3.1. Design

While being on leave or half-pay, Captain Cuthbert Collingwood loved walking over the Northumberland hills with his dog, Bounce, and a pocketful of acorns. As Pope claims, Collingwood dropped them wherever he saw an appropriate place (2004: 35). “Some of the oaks he planted are probably still growing ready to be cut to build ships of the line at a time when nuclear submarines are patrolling the seas, because Collingwood’s purpose was to make sure that the Navy would never want for oaks to build fighting ships upon which the country’s safety depended” (Pope 2004: 35). His forethought was not unfounded, let alone, when the war with France was on the verge of breaking out, the shortage of oaks presented a serious danger for Great Britain. The amount of timber suitable for building ships of war, diminished in six major British forests from 234,000 loads in 1608 to 50,000 in 1783 (a load was 50 cubic feet, and 8 loads - 10 tons). The woods could then give birth to only 25 or 30 ships-of-the-line. By 1791 the annual consumption for merchant shipping only had risen to 167,000 loads, while the Royal Navy faced a demand of 218,000 loads for repairs and new constructions (see: Pope 2004: 36). The country started to be combed in search for suitable timber, for British oak was claimed to be the finest and hardly prone to rot, and due to severe shortages, help from abroad was needed. British shipbuilders valued greatly Italian oak, so called “compass-timber”, from the Adriatic shores, because it grew with curves – perfectly suitable for the rounded frames of ships. Apart from that, beams from Gdańsk and Holstein were bought, whilst American and Canadian oak was never highly regarded by the reason of its vulnerability to rot (see: Pope 2004: 36). After having the wooden hull built, the ship needed her masts to be fitted, yards crossed, guns, shots and powder, sails canvas and rigging hung, and sheeting put to the bottom of the hull in the dry dock. Pinnaces, anchors, cables, galleys, coal and wood used for cooking, provisions and clothing sold by the purser together with a variety of other cargo had to be stored in a ship of war going to her sea voyage. Troublesome as it might be for the British to provide shipyards with appropriate materials to build the vessels
of war, it was not the only difficulty. “The British ships were well built and strong and their men fought bravely, but one skill eluded the Navy Board – the ability to design fast and weatherly ships. Most of the best ships in the Royal Navy in this war were those captured from the French or Spanish, or copied from them. However, the important thing was that the Admiralty was well aware of the deficiencies of its own designers, and their attitude was simple enough – fast ships were needed, whether captured or copied” (Pope 2004: 46). Relatively odd may it appear that the British Empire, over whom the sun did not set at the time, was unable to design a line-of-battle-ship, evoking envy among the enemies. What is more, the invincible sea masters shamelessly copied their opponents and appeared to be more skilful in taking advantage of those designs. The British naval success seems to be even more astounding, having considered the facts given by Pope, namely that ship designers had scarcely any knowledge of hydrodynamic or many natural laws so obvious today, and their accomplishments were to a great extent based only on experience (2004: 47). It was observed, for instance, that “a fat, squat hull could carry more than a slim one, but it would sail slower and would not go to windward so well. The slim hull would go to windward better, but would heel more in a given wind, making problems for the men at the guns – and would not be able to carry so much sail (…)” In other words: “Speed meant a narrow hull; stability meant a beamy one; weatherliness – in this case the ability to carry sail in a high wind and get to windward – meant beam and draught for stability, and slimness for windward ability” (Pope 2004:47). Facing all those mismatching verities along with the Admiralty’s requirements of the number of guns and amount of provisions to be carried by the vessel staying afloat for several months, the ship designer must have been a virtuoso of compromise.

3.2. Ship rating

The term ‘ship-of-the-line’ appeared in the 17th century, taking its name from the tactics, according to which squadrons were ordered to form a track battle-array, and each vessel was to keep in a line behind her flagship, repeating her manoeuvres (Dyskant 2003: 30). Sailing in such an order, the commanders tried to keep the enemy on the lee side, for the gun smoke disturbed him then, and his board stayed higher, more prone to severe damages (the lower the shot hole was made, the deeper it would be after changing course. Consequently, higher water pressure caused a quicker and more dangerous leek). After breaking the enemy’s line, sailors armed with pistols, cutlasses, axes or pikes changed in boarders and jumped onto the opponent’s ship to fight hand-to-hand (Dyskant 2003: 31).
This type of naval tactics caused essential changes in designs of line-of-battle-ships, which in the 18th century hardly reminded their prototype – the galleon. As Pope (2004: 45) and Dyskant (2003: 33) claim, the cannons of a ship-of-the-line (placed along the boards) needed to be placed closer to the axis, otherwise her stability would be endangered. This gave rise to the so called “tumble-home – a name given to the rounded sides, so that a section sliced from the Bellerophon (a 74-gun ship-of-war built in 1786, to whom Napoleon Bonaparte surrendered himself in July 1815 – see: Pope 2004: 36) would look like a wineglass, the tumble-home being the inward curve of the upper part” (Pope 2004: 45). Dyskant adds that the stern was given an oval shape, and the ship’s ornamentation was very much limited. The bottom of the hull was covered with leather and later – lead sheeting, to prevent it from sea crustaceans, damaging the wooden planks. Due to the electrolysis effect, the iron cover had to be abandoned (even if its presence contributed to higher velocity of the ship, released from sea plants and various shellfish, decelerating her movements), for the rivets of the hull corroded in the touch with the sheeting and water. Admiral Nelson had his ships’ boards painted yellow, white and black while the decks of ships-of-war were traditionally painted red, not to make the blood, covering the planks during the battle, so much visible (see: Pope 2004: 40). The alterations applied also to sails – their total size increased to 3,000m², partly owing to new type of sails – triangular jibs, improving ship’s manoeuvrability and raised maximal velocity to 14 knots.

The British Royal Navy divided their ships of war into categories according to number of guns carried (see: Tab.1).

<table>
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<th>Ship Rating</th>
<th>Guns</th>
<th>Crew</th>
<th>Marines</th>
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<td>900</td>
<td>100-112</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>750</td>
<td>90-98</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2200</td>
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<tr>
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<td>650</td>
<td>64-84</td>
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<td>50-54</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>125</td>
<td>24-30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 1. Ship rating (http://www.napoleonguide.com/naple_wwrnatings.htm)

The first and second rates were often used as flagships and they stood in the main line of a battle, together with third-rates, comprising the majority of fleets. The fourth-rate ships on one hand were too weak to serve in a line (they would need at least 74 guns in 1805), so they did so only in an emergency, and on the other hand, they were too ungainly to serve as frigates, so the number of 50-gunners was not large in the Royal Navy. The idea of the frigate appeared in the mid 18th century as a vessel to protect merchant shipping and
serve as a fleet scout (see: http://web2.airmail.net/napoleon/navy.htm). Those swift vessels, called “The eyes of the fleet” were built in a great number to patrol and observe the enemy’s moves like vigilant sniffer-dogs. Still, their deficit was bitterly complained about by British commanders: “All my ill-fortune, hitherto, has proceeded from the want of frigates” (http://web2.airmail.net/napoleon/navy.htm) admitted Nelson while searching for the French fleet before the Battle of the Nile in 1798. Among smaller ships serving the Navy there were: brigs, schooners, cutters (6-14 guns, 25-50 men), Luggers, and other Royal Navy vessels of an auxiliary status such as guard ships, store ships, prison ships, receiving ships, hospital ships, floating batteries, powder magazines or slop ships, as stated in http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Naval.html.

3.3. Abandoned project

According to Dyskant (2003: 187-191) there was one man, who could utterly change the history of Britain and France, if only he had been listened to. Robert Fulton – an American ship constructor and inventor designed a copper, armed submarine Nautilus in 1797, using the projects of his precursor – Bushnell (for more details see: Chapter 4). However, the Royal Navy, accustomed to an open-space fight was not interested in such a device; neither were the French, who rejected Nautilus as being a cruel and non-humanitarian kind of weapon. Furthermore, the British Admiralty rejected another Fulton’s submarine - Torpedo, approved by Prime Minister Pitt as a brilliant weapon to destroy Napoleon’s landing-fleet in 1804. The Admiralty claimed that if Britain had used such a vehicle, other countries would have followed her, developed the submarine and consequently the British mastery of the seas would have finished (Dyskant 2003: 228). Amazingly enough, in 1803 Fulton wanted to sell his another project – a prototype of a steamer that was again disregarded by Bonaparte, who claimed that such vehicles would never be useful in the naval warfare. Napoleon’s traditionalism frustrated Fulton, and maintained French inferiority to the Royal Navy; while the British ships-of-the-line were immobilised by the lack of the wind in the Channel, Fulton’s steamer reached the speed of 4,5 knots, going up the river Seine (see: Dyskant 2003: 191).
CHAPTER 4
British Royal Navy in action

Alone among the European powers, England had no need of big standing army. "Whereas any European power has to support a vast army first of all, we in this fortunate (...) relieved by our insular position of a double burden may turn our individual undivided efforts and attention to the fleet." - Winston Churchill to House of Commons.

"If it had not been for you English, I should have been Emperor of the East; but wherever there is water to float a ship, we are sure to find you in our way." - Napoleon in 1815. (http://web2.airmail.net/napoleon/navy.htm)

At the moment of Admiral Horatio Nelson’s death and the British naval victory at Trafalgar in 1805, the period of Napoleonic Wars was far from being completed. As a matter of fact, this glorious triumph that confirmed Great Britain’s dominance on the sea, did not much harm to the Emperor Bonaparte who was prevailing on land, and only several weeks later defeated Russian and Austrian armies at Austerlitz (see: Trevelyan 1987: 424). Furthermore, Britain though safe from the threat of the French invasion, started to suffer economically from Napoleon’s indirect vengeance, namely – the Continental Blockade which closed the European market for British goods in 1806. Dyskant reveals that the British government, in turn, forbade neutral countries’ merchant ships to trade with France and its allies, whose ports were blocked by the Royal Navy (2003: 330-348). A long struggle, mutual economic extenuation and constant political confusion started to expire along with Napoleon’s defeat in Russia (1812-1813), and finally perished in 1815, when Bonaparte surrendered himself to the British ship-of-the-line Bellerophon (see: Dyskant 2003: 356). Nevertheless, while considering the British naval supremacy over any other country during the Napoleonic Wars, the Battle of Trafalgar appears to be the undisputable masterpiece and the climax of the Royal Navy strength, perfect to conclude the discussion with. Therefore, it will be within the scope of this chapter to analyse briefly the major and most significant naval battles along with their historical background from some time before the Napoleonic Wars’ period up to the year of 1805.

**4.1. Battle of the Quiberon Bay (20.11.1758)**

The fact that Great Britain is located so near, and nonetheless had always remained beyond the reach of French dominance, frustrated French leaders who repeatedly dreamt of taming the proud Albion. A few decades before Napoleon Bonaparte dared try to subdue Britain, king Louis XV aspired to do it during the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763). According to Dyskant, the second half of the 18th century brought a vast improvement in
training and organisation of the Royal Navy (2003: 17-22). In 1759, France decided to invade Britain. One French corps was to land by the Clyde river’s mouth, and the second near London in the county of Essex. The squads of fleet were to conduct misleading operations in Ireland, Antilles and on the English Channel to belie the Britons. Having learnt about the French preparations, the Royal Navy reacted immediately and rear-admiral George Rodney attacked the harbour of Havre in July 1758, destroying ships there, that were to transport the landing troops to Essex. In August Admiral Edward Boscawen defeated at Lagos the French squadron appointed to strike Antilles, and Admiral Edward Hawke blocked Brest with the main forces of French admiral Conflans selected to conduct deceptive operation on the Channel and escort the transport vessels of the second landing corps (see: Dyskant 2003: 19). Admiral Conflans had troubles with his crews decimated the year before by the epidemic of typhus, scurvy and smallpox, but the Royal Navy was not left trouble-free either. As Dyskant further describes, the autumn storms impeded the blockade, pushing Hawke’s ships as far as to the Torbay, which enabled Conflans with his 21 ships-of-the-line and 4 frigates to leave Brest. On November 19th, the French fleet reached the Quiberon Bay and the next day the belated admiral Hawke with his 23 line-of-battle-ships managed to approach him. The weather was gruesome and the French fleet sailed to a narrow and rocky part of the Quiberon. The dangerous storm and low pitch of clouds, obscuring the basin bristled with treacherous coastal islands were thought to secure Conflans from the British pursuit. Yet, Hawke was the last to be deterred by those navigation obstacles. Furthermore, he abandoned the line battle-array and ordered his fleet to follow the enemy, saying that wherever the Frenchmen could pass, there was enough space for the Britons as well (see: Dyskant 2003: 21). Admiral Conflans’s fleet sailed to leeward and due to high waves were unable to open the lowest gun ports, which considerably limited their fire power (one French line-of-battle-ship attacked by two British ships tried opening them. Consequently, the vessel was flooded with water, overturned and sank with the commander and most of the crew). Dyskant claims that eight French ships pushed by the storm (or more likely seized with panic) withdrew to the fortified Isle of Aix and then hid in the mouth of the river Charente (2003: 20-21). The battle lasted till the dusk when the French flagship Soleil Royale ran aground and was destroyed by her own crew in order not to be captured by the Britons. Admiral Conflans was left ashore and his remaining ships dispersed. The total losses of France were 7 ships-of-the-line; either destroyed or surrendered while Hawke proved his superiority, loosing only 50 men (his two vessels Essex and Resolution, were wrecked by the storm).
4.2. American War of Independence (1775-1783)

The Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) caused harsh damage to the French fleet and the government decided to introduce radical modifications. On the word of Dyskant, the French fleet was enlarged to 39 vessels, and the French shipyards and arsenals of Brest, Toulon, Rochefort and Marseille were either renewed or rebuilt, (2003: 59-68). The fleet’s administration was reorganised as well, and the purchase of Corsica in 1767 gave France an important strategic base in the Mediterranean. In 1775 the American colonies began their War of Independence, asking France for military support against Great Britain. Dyskant asserts that apart from standard sailing ships, the Royal Navy had to face American Turtle – the first submarine, constructed in 1773-6 by Bushnell (2003: 62-64). It was an oak, egg-shaped conveyance secured by iron hoops and sealed with tar. Turtle was driven by one person who pumped water in or out of the ballast casks – whether to submerge or surface, and run the vehicle with pedals that turned two propellers. The submarine’s velocity could reach 3 knots (about 5.5 km/h). Turtle carried enough air to stay under water for 30 minutes and was armed with a powder mine with a clock fuse, which was attached under the attacked ship’s hull. However, in September 1776 sergeant Lee who drove Turtle did not manage to fix the bomb under the Vice Admiral Howe’s frigate Eagle, and after being noticed, he had to escape (Dyskant 2003:63). His next attempts also ended in failure; the cautious Britons sank a boat together with Turtle, towed by it to the spot where it was to submerge. The submarine was retrieved, repaired and afterwards (driven by Bushnell himself), attacked the Cerberus frigate with a new seabomb (supposedly a torpedo prototype) that anyhow missed the target, frightening the frigate’s crew only. To avoid being chased after another unsuccessful attack, Bushnell dropped many floating casks which the Britons took for bombs and shot – this became known as the day of fighting the barrels (see: Dyskant 2003: 64). Despite failing, Turtle is noteworthy as probably the first attempt to fight large ships using submarine.

In February 1778 France signed a treaty with the American insurgents and adjured Britain to withdraw her army from the colonies, recognising their independence, which was ignored completely. The war with France was inevitable. What is more, in 1779 and 1780 Spain and the Netherlands joined it as well, partly to help the American colonies, and partly to regain their own European lands lost to the Britons. As Dyskant further remarks, 17 years after the Seven Years’ War the reformed French fleet consisted of 68 ships-of-war and 80 frigates or other vessels whose construction was strong, and artillery very well trained (2003: 65). Spain had 56 mostly new line-of-battle-ships and 70 smaller ones with
considerably well trained crews. Holland having 16 big, 16 smaller ships, and lacking the crews, embodied nothing of a great danger, and was able only to defend its shores. The Royal Navy was proud of 77 ships-of-the-line, next 50 in reserve or under construction, and about 140 other naval vessels with very well trained crews (see: Dyskant 2003: 65).

The War of American Independence ended as a war of Britain against half of the world. The Bourbon ‘family compact’ of France and Spain fought her by sea and land as of old: the French ships under Suffren seriously endangered her communication with India; Russia, Prussia, Holland and the Scandinavian Powers united their diplomatic and naval forces in the ‘armed neutrality of the North’ to defend the rights of neutrals against the Mistress of the Sea. In Ireland, for the first and last time in history, Protestants and Catholics united to overthrow the system by which their common interests were sacrificed to England. In the hour of need, to which her fools had brought her, Britain was saved by her heroes (Trevelyan 1987: 407).

Dyskant reveals that France and Spain decided to invade the British Isles in 1779, which ended in failure due to the stormy weather and epidemic of typhus, scurvy and smallpox among the French (2003: 66). Moreover, the British Admiral Rodney defeated the Spaniards twice off Cape Finisterre and St. Vincent. Nevertheless, the apparently everlasting British fortune halted in September 1781, depriving the Britons of a flagship and 60 transport vessels; the Rear Admiral Graves lost the dominance over the Chesapeake Bay to the French Vice Admiral de Grasse whose ships manoeuvred and sailed better. Therefore, the British forces in Yorktown were deprived of their supplies and had to surrender on 19th October 1781. Consequently, Britain lost the American colonies in 1783. Still, The Royal Navy was occupied by constant French and Spanish attacks. Although the British were victorious at the Caribbean (Admiral Rodney won the battle at Les Saintes in April 1782), the French commander Suffren embodied a serious danger on the Indian Ocean. It is difficult to speculate how his unsolved struggles with Vice Admiral Hughes would have finished if it had not been for French commanders’ disloyalty and the armistice of 1783 (see: Dyskant 2003: 72-74).

To conclude, the French navy appeared to be a powerful and dangerous enemy for the Britons who lost about 2500 merchant vessels (75% of which were sank by the French) while the allied lost about 1000. Having noticed such a resilient and rapidly developing threat, the British policy had to focus on intruding the French navy’s precarious prosperity ‘per fas et nefas’ – that is by all means (see: Dyskant 2003:75). Astoundingly, it was France herself that helped Britain to achieve this objective.

4.3. Battle of Cape St. Vincent (14.02.1797)

In 1789 France quivered with a giant and violent upheaval – the gory Revolution, which was to influence the whole Europe’s future extensively. Dyskant claims, that the
officers of the French navy very often had come from the upper classes, which became an aim of the revolutionary outrage (2003: 76-77). At first, the admirals and officers were forced to resign from the service, and around the year 1892, they were executed frequently. Thus, the Revolution contributed to a vast chaos in the fleet, by allowing only 25% of the old corps of officers to maintain their posts. The vacant positions were filled with non-aristocratic merchant navy officers (lacking the military schooling) or army officers (that were deficient in the basic naval training). Consequently, the precise machine of skilled officers and artillerists, commanding the ships and men with experience in a disciplined manner, collapsed along with the former French naval strength (see: Dyskant 2003: 77).

On 1st February 1793, the war between Great Britain and France was declared. Two days earlier, Horatio Nelson became a commander of the 64-gun *HMS Agamemnon* (since 1789-90 the Royal Navy has preceded the names of her ships with an abbreviation of ‘His/Her Majesty Ship’). He sailed south, to join the Vice Admiral Hood’s Mediterranean Fleet, having no problem with manning his vessel, for eager sailors volunteered quickly, having heard that it was good to serve under Nelson (see: Dyskant 2003: 129). Next year, he was ordered to capture Corsica. This conquest cost him however a painful loss – during the siege of Calvi, some rock slivers caused by French gunshot injured Nelson’s face, and the sight of his right eye was lost due to insufficiency of the 18th century medicine. Bonaparte conducting his campaign, forced the Royal Navy to leave Italian harbours. The Britons had to abandon Corsica as well, for Spain joined the war as a French ally in October 1796; the combined fleets (over 40 ships) would present too strong danger for the time being. While Admiral Jervis, who replaced Hood (see: Hibbert 2001: 394-395), was stationing in Portugal, Nelson commanded a squad of two frigates to evacuate British garrison on Elbe. Dyskant asserts that on his way back, he passed the Spanish squadron in Cadiz unnoticed, owing to thick fog, and informed Jervis about Spanish preparations (2003: 136). Admiral Cordoba in his flagship *Santísima Trinidad*, with 27 ships-of-the-line, 10 frigates and 1 brig, proceeded in the direction of Brest – the port of concentration of the two allied fleets. His squad sailed in two groups (the western – 19 ships, and the eastern – 8 ships). In spite of being outnumbered, the Mediterranean Fleet (15 line-of-battle ships, 4 frigates and 2 smaller vessels) decided to force the enemy to return. Having formed the line battle-array on the 14th February 1797 at Cape St. Vincent, Admiral Jervis sailed between the two groups of the Spanish squad and the battle began.

The British artillery shot 3 broadsides every 5 minutes (Collinwood’s *HMS Excellent* was even faster) while the Spanish needed the same time for only one broadside.
Therefore, 1248 British guns shot 1.5 times more missiles than the 2300 Spanish ones (see: Dyskant 2003:137). The eastern group of Rear Admiral Morena was quickly dispersed, and the Royal Navy attacked Admiral Cordoba, commanding the other part of the squad. His group however was pushed by the wind to the back of the British column, and further – to Morena, who turned back to join the other group as soon as he noticed that it was possible. The Spanish fleet would continue its journey to Brest if it had not been for Nelson’s vigilance and disobedience. In defiance of the “Fighting Instructions” his HMS Captain left the column, and followed by 3 ships (including Collingwood’s Excellent), sailed North-West to cross the course of Cordoba. Admiral Jervis understood Nelson’s move and supported him, but Captain (74 guns) had been severely damaged in the fire of 600 Spanish guns before she reached the enemy. After a long cannonade, two Spanish vessels – San Nicolas (80 guns) and San Jose (112 guns) collided and stopped, since their rigging tangled. Nelson swiftly attacked them by boarding San Nicolas with his marines and sailors, and then – through her board, he captured San Jose as well. This type of boarding became known in the Royal Navy as ‘Nelson’s patent bridge for capturing enemies of first rate ships’ (Dyskant 2003:138-139). Collingwood seized other two ships and the battle was finished at dusk. Cordoba withdrew to Cadiz, having lost 1,000 men, while the British lost 300, and Jervis immediately blockaded this harbour. Owing to Nelson’s glorious nonconformity the Battle of St. Vincent was a landmark in British naval tactics. Jervis was honoured with a title of Earl St. Vincent and Nelson, whom the Admiral forgave breaking the rules, was given the Order of the Bath and the promotion to Rear Admiral.

4.4. Battle of the Nile (1-2.08.1798)

On the word of Dyskant, in 1797 the British Navy also experienced the two, mentioned before mutinies; at Spithead and Nore, furthermore, Nelson was crippled again (2003: 150). While attacking Tenerife, he was shot with a musket bullet in the right elbow; on 27th July the surgeon Eshelby had to amputate Nelson’s right arm. Next year after recovery, Nelson was appointed to the Mediterranean Fleet to prevent the French ships from leaving Toulon. However, a huge storm dispersed his ships and damaged the flagship Vanguard. In the meantime, the French fleet left Toulon and sailed to Malta, but Nelson’s frigates-‘the eyes of the fleet’ withdrew to Gibraltar during the storm, so he was deprived of their recognition. “I have again to deeply regret my want of frigates, to which I shall ever attribute my ignorance of the situation of the French fleet” (http://www.wtj.com) wrote Nelson to Admiral the Earl of St. Vincent. Consequently, he had to use intuition and
guess where the French might have been; because of contrary winds, their course to the Atlantic was impossible (which was confirmed by a merchant vessel met on the way – Dyskant writes, that her crew admitted that the French squadron was seen in Egypt), (2003: 155). The French Admiral Bruyes anchored his ships (their starboards were directed to the open sea) at the Aboukir peninsular in a line long for 3 km, parted from land by shallow water and reefs. What is more, one-third of his crews were ashore, collecting provisions, an taking care of the sick. French ships were unprepared for battle; guns of their ports were brought on land, but not even set to a battery. Bruyes thought Nelson would not sail onto the shallow, unknown basin to attack him, and especially not at dusk. But he did not know Nelson. Unexpectedly, the British squad hit the front of the French column, taking it from both sides. Although *HMS Culloden* ran aground due to the shallow water, a few other line-of-battle-ships managed to carefully approach the enemy from the left side (where there were no guns!) and Nelson with other 6 vessels sailed to the right side. A vehement cannonade began at 6.30 p.m. on the 1st of August 1798 and lasted till midnight, finishing with glorious victory of Nelson, (who was severely wounded in head) though the French starboard guns caused much damage to the British squad. French commander Villeneuve and his 5 vessels anchored further did not attack Nelson, but escaped. Napoleon Bonaparte left ashore was separated from his motherland and lost the army treasury on the deck of *Orient* that blew up at 10 p.m. France lost 11 line-of-battle ships and 2 frigates; 1,700 men were killed, 500 wounded and 2000 surrendered, while the British had 288 dead, 727 wounded (including Nelson) and some of their ships were harshly damaged (see: Dyskant 2003: 158).

This triumph made Horatio Nelson a national hero; British press compared the Battle of the Nile to the victory over the Spanish Armada. A Latin anagram ‘HONOR EST A NILO’ (honour is from the Nile) was composed from the letters of his name along with the fourth stanza of the British anthem ‘God Save the King’ that glorified Nelson. He was rewarded generously and became known all over Europe, though his mistress – Lady Emma Hamilton, was not approved and infuriated his wife Fanny – (Dyskant 2003: 179). In 1801 Nelson, promoted to Vice Admiral, joined Parker’s squadron and sailed to the Baltic Sea, earlier fighting at Copenhagen, because the Danes refused to pass the Royal Navy. Again Nelson disobeyed orders when Parker raised the signal ‘Leave off action’, after several hours of cannonade and much loss on both sides. Lipoński depicts Nelson’s famous reaction to the signal from the flagship – he raised the telescope to his blind eye and said to his officers that he saw no signal at all (2004: 447). The Battle of Copenhagen
ended in British victory and Nelson’s insubordination was forgiven once again, not to mention his reward – the title of Viscount. Next year, on the 25th of March the Treaty of Amiens stopped the war, though not for long.

4.5. Blockade (1803-1805)

According to Dyskant, the time of armistice was used by Napoleon to regulate home affairs and organise a new French army whose main aim would be to invade Great Britain (2003: 192). Napoleon claimed that three days of foggy weather would be enough for him to become the master of London, the British Parliament and English Bank. All he needed was to transport the huge army via the English Channel. Some ideas of the French engineers or pseudo-scientists how to achieve this goal were astonishing (see: Dyskant 2003: 200-201); Mathieu suggested digging a tunnel under La Manche which would be aired by ventilation manholes protruding above the water, and Thilorier proposed transporting the army by air, using huge balloons (each of whom would carry 3,000 soldiers). Other projects included using Fulton’s steamers or glass, bell-shaped caissons towed by boats, and the most inventive one – crossing the Channel on dolphins’ backs (the idea of Quatremere-Disjouval, who wanted the trained dolphins to carry a saddle, reins and two casks filled with air, which would prevent them from submerging). Some technical difficulties caused that even the Prinet’s plan of floating fortresses – huge armed rafts of size 400x175m was abandoned as well (Dyskant 2003: 201).

In anticipation of such an invasion, a string of small round forts known as Martello towers was set up along the southern and East Anglian coasts, and Pitt ordered the digging of a defensive ditch, the Royal Military Canal, across the vulnerable expanse of Romney Marsh. Napoleon assembled a fleet of rafts and barges, some carrying strange devices like windmills to drive them, and an army of ninety thousand waited at Boulogne for embarkation orders. As with the Spanish Armada, what was needed was a fleet strong enough to cover the passage of these troops across the Channel. ‘Let us be masters of the straits for six hours,’ declared Napoleon, ‘and we shall be masters of the world.’ His Admiral, Villeneuve, was ordered to lure the British fleet out to the Wet Indies and then shake it off and hurry back to Boulogne (Burke 1985: 199-200).

Dyskant reveals that in 1803, the ‘Flotilla of the Year X’ consisted of 1,310 landing vessels that could transport 80,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry and 4,000 artillery at one time (2003:203). “This fleet was scattered in harbours round the coast of France, and later round the coast of Spain – in Toulon and Cartagena in the Mediterranean, and Cadiz, Vigo, Ferrol Rochefort and Brest in the Atlantic. If they had put to sea, they might have combined in a single fleet that was strong enough to force its way up Channel (Howarth 1969: 20).
The war was restarted on May 15th, 1803 and the Royal Navy’s main task was to blockade the enemy’s harbours in order not to release their ships and let them threaten the British shores. The blockade, called ‘the Long Watch’ (Dyskant 2003: 199) was exhausting and demanded excellent sailing abilities. Nelson blockaded Toulon, Gardner-Rochefort, Pellew circled at the Bay of Biscay and Keith patrolled the Northern Sea harbours. Howarth (1969: 38) claims that the blockade of Brest commanded by Cornwallis was very difficult, due to the Isle of Ushant: “Mariners must exercise the greatest caution (…) This island is surrounded by dangers; rocks are numerous and some lie far from the land; fogs and thick weather are not uncommon; the tidal streams are strong, and the extent of their influence seaward undetermined” (Howarth 1969: 38). However hard and perilous might it be, the Britons had to sail close enough to observe Brest.

By modern standards their ships were unhandy, slow to go about and slow to windward; and probably no modern mariners would dare to explain exactly how they were able to stand off and on, estimating the tidal streams and currents, night and day, summer and winter, constantly solving the problems of navigation and ship-handling – and this not merely in one ship, but in a whole fleet of them. The achievement astonished the French, who looked out every morning and saw the sails still there, and it is still as astonishing now (Howarth 1969: 38-39).

Ironically, the only opportunity for the exhausted British crews to relax and return to Plymouth were the westerly gales which thwarted the French to leave the harbour. In turn, Nelson’s situation in the Mediterranean was difficult, not due to weather, but because the nearest ports under the British control (Malta and Gibraltar) were located 600-700 miles away from Toulon. Therefore his fleet had to be self-sufficient in curing their sick and getting provisions. While the Northern squads strived only for keeping the enemy in harbours, Nelson’s dream, according to Howarth, was to provoke the French to leave Toulon and fight them.

4.6. Great Pursuit

Napoleon planned to disturb the Royal Navy, blockading his harbours, which would enable the landing-army to cross the Channel. French Admirals – Villeneuve, Ganteaume and Missiessy were supposed to sail to the Caribbean and conduct actions that would force the British Admiralty to send there at least 30 ships-of-the-line. According to Dyskant, the French squads would then avoid the battle, return to Europe, defeating the blockade forces in El Ferrol, and anchor in Rochefort. In December 1804 the British ‘Long Watch’ had to be enlarged to blockade Spanish harbours, for this country declared war to Britain as well (2003: 211-212). Admiral Horatio Nelson did not know Napoleon’s plan and all he wanted was an open battle; he was withdrawing his squadron blockading
Toulon, leaving only frigates, to give the enemy an impression that he left his position. “In his anxiety to lure the French out, he had set his net too loosely” (Howarth 1969: 49). Admiral Villeneuve and his squadron left Toulon on March 30th 1805, followed by Nelson’s two frigates which, however, after some time had to return, in order to report to their commander, and lost the enemy from sight. The British spies in France managed to reveal Bonaparte’s plans about the fleet, however the information did not reach Toulon on time and Admiral Nelson could only guess where Villeneuve had sailed. Howarth claims, that Nelson’s intuition failed him, and he lost over a month, sailing blindly, searching for the enemy in the Mediterranean, until on May 10th he received the information that the French had sailed to the West Indies (1969: 49). According to the orders from the Admiralty, Nelson’s squad was supposed to escort two convoys on their way to Russia, yet the Admiral (as one might suppose, having considered his character and the urge of a battle) ignored the instructions and followed Villeneuve. Admiral Ganteaume was unable to escape from Brest unseen, so Napoleon’s original plan of combining his fleet in the Caribbean failed (see: Howarth 1969: 49-50). Instead, the Emperor sent Villeneuve orders to intercept the British colonies in the West Indies, return to Europe a month later, release Spanish ships anchoring off Ferrol and sail to Brest, to help Ganteaume. Napoleon strongly believed it was achievable as long as Nelson was searching for them in the Mediterranean. “This was a madly ambitious scheme that only revealed the Emperor’s ignorance of naval limits” (Howarth 1969: 50). Villeneuve, according to this scheme, was expected to fight a major battle against the forewarned Royal Navy off Brest, after double crossing of the Atlantic and month-lasting struggles in the West Indies. In his thorough loyalty to France, he began to fulfil Napoleon’s wishes, Nelson, however, was that time on his way to the Indies (see: Dyskant 2003: 217). After capturing a small British island, the French Admiral learnt about the pursuit, and decided to return to Europe, avoiding the British fleet. “History blamed him for not waiting for Ganteaume, and for being afraid of Nelson, and so did many men in his fleet who did not know his orders” (Howarth 1969: 51). Consequently, Nelson, disappointed not to find Villeneuve in the Caribbean, returned to Europe as well and went ashore in Gibraltar for the first time after 727 days onboard (see: Dyskant 2003: 219). In the meantime, a brig Curieux from his squadron, on her way to England, noticed the French fleet sailing in the direction of the Biscay Bay, escaped the chase and reported to the Admiralty. Therefore, appropriate orders could be given and on 22nd July, two British squads of Sir Robert Calder approached the French off the Cape Finisterre. As Dyskant further claims, the battle fought in fog was however inconclusive,
because neither side wanted to risk their impaired vessels; yet it halted the French and Napoleon did not find his 38 ships (combined with Ganteaume’s would give a fleet of 66 vessels) in Boulogne when he arrived. Instead, Villeneuve sailed to Cadiz, where the Royal Navy blockaded him soon afterwards. Napoleon was furious when his admirals failed him; his brave plan of invasion failed as well, and the Emperor dissolved the landing-army, switching his interest to land – to Russia and Austria in particular (see: Dyskant 2003: 222). “When Napoleon had to abandon his plan, he said he had never meant to do it anyway, it had only been a feint. This was the kind of prop to their self-esteem that only small children or dictators use with any hope of being believed” (Howarth 1969: 45).

Admiral Villeneuve was an unfortunate man to fight for an Emperor who was a soldier, not a sailor; whose “orders to his navy sometimes overstepped the mark: knowing too little of the sea, the genius faltered, and he demanded what was really impossible” (Howarth 1969: 83). What is more, the allied Spaniards with excellent ships, but untrained men, were proud of having a longer naval tradition, and resented the French command. As far as Villeneuve’s own fleet is concerned, it was utterly different from Nelson’s: “In his own fleet, there was no band of brothers: he lacked the personality or the conviction to create one. Some of his captains were efficient, some seemed to be loyal to him, and some were utterly discouraged by the endless demoralising need to avoid a battle. It was a fleet at war within itself” (Howarth 1969: 86). It was not that Villeneuve was afraid of Nelson, as many people accused him, not being familiar with the reality. The French Admiral was a realist – he knew that his fleet, being blocked for so many months, lacked the training at an open sea, while the British spent the time on constant exercise. The voyage across the Atlantic did not train the French fleet, but showed only its numerous weaknesses; Villeneuve’s ships returned impaired and the crews – sick. Nelson, who experienced the very same journey, “had come back as fit as ever, and was still at sea, still eagerly waiting outside his harbour like a cat outside a mousehole” (Howarth 1969: 85). Nonetheless, Napoleon received volumes of libel that blackened Villeneuve’s character, written by his companion – general Lauriston, whom Howarth describes as a soldier, who insisted on telling Villeneuve what to do at sea, and endlessly criticised his tactics (1969: 98). Accused of cowardice, incompetence, indecision and overwhelming fear of Nelson, the Admiral was a true victim of his times. He sincerely wanted to fulfil Bonaparte’s unrealistic orders, and strived to do it. Unfortunately, he himself was not enough.

The series of adversities at sea made Napoleon ‘sick of the navy’; when the Minister of Marine wanted to defend Villeneuve, the Emperor replied: “Until you have
thought of something convincing to say, (…) kindly do not mention to me this humiliating affair, or remind me of that cowardly person” (Howarth 1969: 93). Directing his total interest to the land, Bonaparte reduced his navy to the means of transport of the army, and ordered the Admiral to leave Cadiz and sail for the Mediterranean. It was the voyage that finished off Trafalgar, and annihilated any former strength of the French navy, instead of giving Villeneuve a chance to regain Napoleon’s confidence.

4.7. Battle of Trafalgar (21.10.1805)

Howarth claims, that leaving Cadiz in the evening of October 20th 1805, the combined French and Spanish fleet consisted of 33 line-of-battle-ships, while the British Royal Navy present in this area had 27 of them (1969: 9). Villeneuve’s frigates, hidden among larger vessels, did not observe the Royal Navy, for they lacked a night-signalling system. The squad of Captain Blackwood’s frigates, on the other hand, traced every move of the French and signalled constantly, using lights and flares. The combined fleet sailed blindly, was confused, and discouraged by Blackwood’s coordinated recognition, not to mention the overpowering fear evoked by Nelson’s probable closeness. “They had the uneasy feeling of being seen without being able to see” (Howarth 1969: 121). According to Dyskant, Nelson’s squad was remarked by one French vessel, but the message passed orally from ship to ship, reached Admiral Villeneuve about two hours later (2003: 261-262). After midnight, Captain Blackwood experienced a fretful time when clouds shaded the sky and made the darkness even closer – then he lost the enemy from sight. “Certainly this was a situation to make any seaman anxious – to be alone in the dark in shifting winds off a lee shore, among a hostile, invisible and vastly more powerful fleet. But the anxiety he remembered was only that the enemy might have escaped him” (Howarth 1969: 110). However, he managed to follow the combined fleet and the dawn revealed a total chaos among them – the column was stretching for several miles, the vessels sailed slowly for the fear of collision, and sometimes parallel to one another. The Britons greeted the sight with excitement; the battle, looked forward so eagerly, was imminent (see: Howarth 1969: 125).

On the word of Howarth, facing a danger of the major encounter, along with passing by the English Gibraltar and batteries ashore, commanding a fleet of differently trained or untrained men, Villeneuve decided to return to Cadiz hastily (1969: 129). This was the time for Nelson to react as he had planned before. The realisation of the plan, discussed earlier with his captains, appeared however considerably different from the original; the Royal Navy was supposed to break the enemy’s line in three points, fighting
abreast. Howarth claims that the reality proved different, since both fleets were smaller than Nelson had forethought (1969: 132-133). It would be rather difficult to fight a naval (or any other) battle according to strictly planned guidelines, because a commander can seldom predict all the enemy’s behaviour and make them cooperate. Nelson knew, that sailing north or southwards, the ships would have a beam swell, which makes aiming the hardest test of naval artillery. Moreover, the French (apart from having slow-matches at their guns, while the British used flint-locks, enabling almost instantaneous fire) had a habit of aiming high at the rigging and masts (probably to avoid pursuit), whereas the Royal Navy aimed at the wood; “to shoot at the hull (...) could put the enemy’s guns and gunners out of action, but it seldom wrecked the ship beyond repair” (Howarth 1969: 133). These different tactics illustrate both fleets’ attitudes to the fight – the British acted as aggressors, whilst the French preferred a defensive policy. Having considered all those circumstances, Admiral Nelson ordered to attack the enemy ahead at 11.40 a.m. on October 21st in two groups (one commanded by himself in a flagship Victory, the other by Collingwood in the Royal Sovereign) and hoisted the famous signal: “England expects that every man will do his duty” (http://www.napoleonguide.com). The sailors in his squad “knew the empty sleeve from Teneriffe, the blind eye from Calvi, the scar on his forehead from the Battle of the Nile – such honourable souvenirs belonged more often to seamen than to admirals. And they knew the stories of the signal of recall he refused to see at Copenhagen, and of the two Spanish ships he boarded in person at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent. They believed he was a man to lead them into danger, not to send them” (Howarth 1969: 77-78). All the British commanders understood Nelson’s movement and followed. “‘We scrambled into battle as best we could,’ one officer wrote, ‘each man to take his bird.’ He was only a lieutenant, and tactics were not his business, but his phrase reflected the general eagerness” (Howarth 1969: 130). The Spanish reaction to Villeneuve’s order to sail back to Cadiz was far from approving: “The fleet is doomed. The French admiral does not know his business. He has compromised us all” (Howarth 1969: 135). Villeneuve was however the only one who foresaw Nelson’s plan and knew what to expect. At the same time, having not a slightest doubt of victory, Nelson was discussing with his officers the number of the prize-ships that it would be pleasurable to capture, and he insisted on twenty. The Royal Navy, approaching the enemy’s left boards (ports), managed to break the column in two points, being constantly shot at. Soon afterwards, the artillery struggle changed into more one-to-one fight, blurred by the gun-smoke. Victory experienced particularly severe attack of at least four French line-of-battle-ships, one of
whom, the *Redoutable* appeared to be the most hurtful. Admiral Nelson, with the typical for him disregard of the danger, refused to cover his gleaming orders and stars with a coat, and it was one of the Captain Lucas’s men hidden high in the rigging of *Redoutable*, who noticed them among the flashes of fire and gun-smoke. About 13.30, a bullet from his gun tore the air, and Nelson fell on the deck with his spine overshot (see: Dyskant 2003: 278-279). He was then giving his last orders, lying wounded and paralysed below the deck, as the battle continued. As mentioned before, the excellently trained, faster, and considerably better motivated British crews overwhelmed the enemy despite being outnumbered. The news about Nelson’s wound had not reached the whole fleet swiftly, but where it approached, the devoted seamen fought even more relentlessly in a sense of grief and despair for their beloved Admiral. One by one were the French and Spanish vessels surrendering, under the outrageous and determined British attack, and Villeneuve had to surrender as well. Loosing his strengths minute by minute, Nelson congratulated his men on the brilliant victory, and even complained slightly that they intercepted only 15 prize-ships. He died at 16.30. About 17.45, the French *Achille* exploded, as a result of sudden fire in the gunpowder storage, which actually was a strong accent, finishing the Battle of Trafalgar (see: Dyskant 2993: 304). The Royal Navy had 1,690 men killed, or wounded, while the French and Spanish fleets: 4,500-7,000 men (see: http://web2.airmail.net/napoleon/navy.htm)

After Nelson’s death, Admiral Collingwood took the commandment of the severely impaired fleet, together with the prizes (the rest of the combined fleet escaped to Cadiz or to the Mediterranean). What came afterwards, was a huge storm, lasting four days. The British vessels, dispersed by it, were losing eye-contact, and the crews, occupied by saving themselves, had to abandon with heavy hearts most of the prizes – 11 of them sank shortly afterwards, and 3 escaped to Cadiz (see: Dyskant 2003: 304). Although Trafalgar proved the British mastery over any other navy (they did not loose a single vessel), the storm proved their complete defencelessness against the forces of nature. The news of the glorious triumph reached England and overpowered the people with a severe and long-lasting mourn after Admiral Horatio Nelson.
CONCLUSIONS

The British Royal Navy during the time of Napoleonic Wars presented a very complex organization; coordinated, and at the same time torn with difficulties. It is unbelievable how the crews, ill-fed, pressed and separated from their families for years, managed to overcome severe conditions together with frequent discontent. Moreover, even the terrifying data of repeated illnesses onboard and mass mortality of seamen did not stop the Royal Navy on its way towards the mastery of the seas. Devastating corruption of the Admiralty, and the custom of selective patronage, promoting mostly the men from the South to high posts (“Nelson, coming from Norfolk, was unusual, and Collingwood, who came from Northumberland, was always an outsider” (Howarth 1969: 37)), could not have contributed to the British naval strength. Neither could the fact, that the British ship-designs were inferior to the French or the Spanish. The English traditionalism that was a cause of rejection of innovative systems, as Fulton’s submarine, or a steamer, might have triggered immeasurable harm to the whole nation. Fortunately, Bonaparte did not appreciate them either, which cancelled his projects of invading Great Britain. The Royal Navy was in possession of crews better trained, and skilled in maritime labour. The history itself supported the Britons by depriving the French navy of its leading officers, during the gory Revolution of 1789. At the same time, the presence of such leaders as Admiral Nelson, could grant the British dominance over any other fleets in those times.

The fact that the Royal Navy was forced to act as the defender of its homeland against the French aggressors, and that it was so reliable, confirmed the national confidence. “That deep-rooted pride must have been the first cause of the astonishing efflorescence of naval power and skill (…). Before the war against France, the navy had its evil days, when its reputation was low. But for years before Trafalgar, it alone had been in contact with the enemy, when the army was land-bound at home. It had won some famous victories, and it could be seen to be the country’s first defence, so it had risen high in the esteem of English people” (Howarth 1969: 37).

Now, two centuries after the last great naval battle of the British sailing ships, their long-lasting mastery of the seas along with the perfectly fulfilled duty of maintaining Great Britain safe from invasions, are not forgotten. Admiral Horatio Nelson still watches his country from his column, high above the Trafalgar Square in London, ready to be the first one to notice the enemy approaching. Researchers still investigate and elaborate on the
British Royal Navy’s dominance in the past, and the fiction does not remain silent either; the adventures and lives of such officers as Jack Aubrey (by P. O’Brian), or Horatio Hornblower (by C.S. Forester), spent in the Royal Navy in Nelson’s times, present a perfect opportunity for an ordinary reader to learn much about the naval reality of that period. Although such a view (see: Fig.3.), as observed by people on the Cape Trafalgar on October 21st 200 years ago, will be seen never again, and the romantic, semi-legendary position of the sailing navies will never return, it is beyond doubt, that there will always be hearts to whom the times and naval heroes will signify something more than only a closed past period of history.

![Fig.3. Ships-of-war](image-url)
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