Horatio Nelson was born at Burnham Thorpe on Sept. 29, 1758. He entered the Royal Navy at the age of 12, and by 20 he had risen from midshipman to commander. In 1780 Nelson took a convoy to America and the West Indies, but the Admiralty placed him on half pay the next year after the American Revolution ended. Nelson then went to France to learn the language.

In 1784 Nelson was given command of the Boreas and sent again to the West Indies. There he gained considerable ill will by seizing five French merchantmen who were violating the Navigation Acts through irregular trading. He also met a young widow, Mrs. Frances Nisbet, whom he married in 1787. Nelson was then ordered home. For nearly 6 years, somewhat in disfavor at the Admiralty, he was unemployed. But when England entered the French Revolutionary Wars in 1793, Nelson was given command of the Agamemnon and sent to the Mediterranean Sea. In August he arrived at Naples, where he met Sir William Hamilton, the English ambassador, and his charming young wife, Emma. Nelson's romantic and naval careers both began to blossom.

**Rising Hero**

In 1794 Lord (Samuel) Hood sent Nelson, in command of seamen and marines, to build and arm batteries about Bastia during the English attack on Corsica. He was successful in this assignment and also at Calvi, where he lost the sight of his right eye as the result of a stone-splitter wound during a cannonade against one of his batteries. Nelson's eye patch soon became a symbol. In 1796 Nelson was made commodore and sent to harass the French coastal trade. Then, as commander of the Captain, he joined Sir John Jervis's fleet.

On Feb. 13, 1797, while on a southerly course off Portugal, the British sighted the Spanish fleet in loose formation heading north. Jervis steered between the two halves of the enemy, but he misjudged his course reversal. Nelson perceived the problem, boldly broke away from the line, and headed for the Spaniards. Jervis, seeing Nelson's intention, ordered Cutthbert Collingwood to aid him. The result was that Nelson and Collingwood hit the Spanish fleet and threw it into confusion, enabling the rest of Jervis's ships to come up and to achieve a victory. Fortunately for Nelson, Jervis was not a stickler about rules. Nelson was praised for his action rather than court-martialed as he feared. As a result of the victory off Cape Saint Vincent, Nelson received promotion to rear admiral.

**Victorious Admiral**

Returning once again to the inshore squadron off France, Nelson lost his right arm in an attempt to cut out a treasure ship at Santa Cruz de Tenerife. In April 1798 he rejoined the fleet and was sent to watch the French fleet at Toulon. Eventually, the French evaded Nelson. He pursued them to Alexandria, Egypt, and found the French fleet anchored in Aboukir Bay. Now Nelson's careful training of his captains paid dividends when he discovered that the French were prepared only for attack from the sea. As dusk fell, his ships approached the French line from the west, splitting as they reached the anchored vessels so that they doubled up, one on each side of the enemy. The result was the complete annihilation of all the French ships except two frigates that escaped. Napoleon I and the entire French army were left stranded in Egypt. As soon as the news reached Britain, Nelson became Baron Nelson of the Nile. His name became known throughout Europe.

Nelson then returned to Naples, which, having declared war on Napoleon, had been overcome by French troops and fifth columnists while Nelson was at Leghorn. Hastily recalled, Nelson insisted on the annulment of the capitulation agreed to by the Neapolitan general Fabriero Ruffo and on the absolute surrender of the Neapolitan Jacobins. He court-martialed and hanged the Neapolitan commodore Francesco Caracciolo, who had deserted, and he restored civil power. For these acts the grateful king of the Two Sicilies made him Duke of Bronte.

During this period Nelson became infatuated with Emma, Lady Hamilton. While living with her, he conducted the blockades of Egypt and Malta. In 1800 he was permitted to return home because of ill health, and he traveled across Europe with the Hamiltons. In London he met his wife and separated amicably from her. That same year, 1801, Lady Hamilton bore Nelson a daughter, Horatia.

In 1801 Nelson was promoted to vice-admiral and sent as second-in-command to Sir Hyde Parker on an expedition to break up the armed Northern Neutrality League. His first act upon joining was characteristically direct and insubordinate—he wrote to the Admiralty that Sir Hyde stayed abed late with his young wife. The expedition sailed shortly. The Danes refused the British ultimatum, and Nelson was given the job of attacking the anchored Danish fleet and hulks in Copenhagen harbor. He skillfully moved his fleet through shoals after reoccupying the channel, and then on the morning of April 2, 1801, he fought a bitter 4-hour action that resulted in eventual victory. The battle was ended by an armistice called for by Nelson in order to save the lives of Danish sailors. Though his ships were badly battered and he had ignored an optional recall signal flown by Sir Hyde Parker, Nelson achieved a diplomatic success and was made a vicomte.

Nelson returned to England, where in order to impress the French he was put in command off Dover. This command was not a great success, and Nelson's expedition against Boulogne became an expensive failure because the French were prepared. As soon as the armistice that led to the Peace of Amiens in 1801 was signed, Nelson came ashore and settled with the Hamiltons on his new estate at Merton, Surrey, about an hour's drive from the Admiralty. Sir William Hamilton died in April 1803, and thereafter Nelson and Lady Hamilton were together exclusively.

**Battle of Trafalgar**

Upon the outbreak of war again in 1803, Nelson was dispatched to command the fleet in the Mediterranean. There he watched the French under adverse circumstances, blocking the French fleet at Toulon for 22 months. In January 1805 Napoleon decided that the way to conquer the whole of Europe was to combine the French and Spanish fleets in the West Indies, lure the English away from the Channel, and seize the British Isles. With this in mind, the French commander, Pierre de Villeneuve, gave Nelson the slip and headed west while Nelson chased east to Egypt in vain. Dogged by poor intelligence reports and foul winds, Nelson pursued the French to Martinique and back to Europe but could not overtake them. Meanwhile, the returning French fleet had been met off Cape Frio in road by Sir Robert Calder.
On Oct. 9, 1805, Nelson arrived once more off the European coast. He resumed command off Cadiz and issued his famous order for the fleet to attack in two columns. On October 21 Nelson came upon the combined French and Spanish fleets, under Villeneuve, sailing north in a long crescent column off Cape Trafalgar, Spain. Hoisting a signal that became immortal, "England expects every man to do his duty," Nelson led the northern column to cut off and hold the Allied van while Collingwood annihilated the center and rear. Nelson, in spite of advice, insisted upon wearing his full uniform into battle, and at the height of the encounter he was badly wounded by a musket shot from the fighting top of the French ship Redoubtable, which his flagship Victory had fouled. He died 3 hours later as the victory, one of the most significant in history, was completed. Twenty enemy ships were captured, and one was blown up. The English lost no ships. This decisive English victory ended Napoleon's power on the sea.


Nelson the Man

No one, perhaps, better symbolized the British hero than Nelson--dashing naval commander, viscount, and lover. More than this, Nelson ranks high as a leader of men not only for the bravery and dash he displayed at Cape Saint Vincent, but also for his coolness under fire, his joy in battle, and the humanity he displayed at Copenhagen. Nelson was a beloved leader because he knew his officers and men. His captains knew what he wanted to do and how he thought it should be done. The whole combination was called the Nelson touch.

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