

HORATIO NELSON: HERO AND PATIENT

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In a letter to the Duke of Clarence in 1794 Lord Nelson wrote "One plan I pursue, never to employ a doctor, nature does all for me and Providence protects me." In spite of this he was treated by at least 25 doctors and had more operations than any other flag officer of the time. Horace Nelson was born on 29 September 1758. His mother died three years before he joined the Navy, at the age of 12, as a captain's servant in HMS Reasonable under the command of his uncle Maurice Suckling. Nelson soon discovered the first ailment that would dog him for the rest of his seagoing life – he was seasick. Following service in several ships including a merchant vessel and a trip to the Arctic, Nelson joined HMS Seahorse in 1773 on a voyage to the East Indies. In 1776 he became ill and was sent home in HMS Dolphin. It was thought that he would not survive the voyage and it is likely that he was suffering from malaria; this would recur throughout his life. Fortunately he recovered and in 1777 Nelson passed the lieutenants' examination, although he was a year younger than the 20 specified in the regulations, he was entered as Horatio Nelson.

His first voyage as an officer was to Jamaica as second lieutenant. One year later he was made Master and Commander of HMS Badger and in 1779 Post-captain of HMS Hinchinbroke, at the age of 21. One of his first tasks was to escort a number of troop transports to the mouth of the River San Juan with a view to capturing the Fort of the Immaculate Conception. During the voyage down the Mosquito Coast it is reported Nelson was affected by machineel poisoning; the machineel tree is the most poisonous tree in the world. Having reached the mouth of the San Juan River Nelson took over command of the project. In the expedition more than half of the men died and Nelson's life was only saved by a signal that he had been promoted and he was rowed back down the river to take command of his new ship, however he was too ill and was taken back to the UK.

The cause of Nelson's illness was unclear, it is thought to be malaria probably complicated by scurvy, but the recurrent paralysis of an arm and leg suffered, once back in England, suggests that he might have had typhoid. He recovered sufficiently by 1782 to be given command of HMS Albemarle and was posted to the North American station. In Québec he "fell in love" and threatened to jump ship, he was dissuaded and sailed on to the West Indies where again he was ill. It was thought he might have TB and he was looked after by Mrs Mountray the elderly Commissioner's young wife, again he "fell in love" but later became engaged to and married the widow Fanny Nisbet.

He argued bitterly with Commissioner Mountray over his right to fly a broad pennant and antagonised almost everyone by insisting on the strict observance of the Navigation Laws. He also sided with Prince William Henry over some very ill judged decisions. He became ill again in 1786 and he was again thought unlikely to survive and was shipped home with his new bride, accompanied by a puncheon of rum to receive his body. He survived the voyage but was out of favour with the Admiralty and had no further commands for five years.

Nelson's fortunes took a turn for the better with the storming of the Bastille in 1789 and he was given HMS Agamemnon and sailed with Admiral Hood to the Mediterranean. Corsica was seen as a potential British base and in June 1794 Nelson was involved in the siege of Calvi when a cannonball hit the granite rock in front of him throwing up a shower of dust causing irretrievable damage to his right eye, such that thereafter he could only distinguish light from dark, although the eye looked normal. A Court of Examiners of the Royal College of Surgeons judged this was fully equal to the loss of an eye for the purposes of compensation. Nelson never wore a black patch although he did have a small green peak fixed to his hat to protect his good eye from the sun's glare.

In 1797 he complained of a constrictive chest pain which sounds like angina, however shortly after this he was involved in the battle of St Vincent when he elected to disregard Admiral Jarvis's orders, his resulting manoeuvre captured two Spanish ships and he was promoted Rear Admiral and made Knight of the Bath. He also received a blow to his left side resulting in what was probably a hernia "as large as a fist".

His first command as an Admiral was to a voyage to capture Tenerife. This was an ill-fated mission and Nelson should have turned back after several setbacks, but on 24th July 1797 he set sail in boats with 1000 men. As he landed on the coast he was shot through the right arm, his life was probably saved by his step son Josiah using his neckerchief as a tourniquet. The arm was subsequently amputated just above the elbow.

In spite of initial deep depression and stump pain for months he recovered sufficiently to be given command of a squadron to chase Napoleon across the Mediterranean. They came across the French fleet at anchor in Aboukir Bay. The resulting attack by Nelson's squadron captured or destroyed all but three ships of the French fleet. During the battle a piece of iron shrapnel hit Nelson in the head raising a skin flap which fell over his good eye causing complete temporary blindness and substantial blood loss. He recovered but suffered headaches for sometime after this.

He went to recuperate at Naples where he fell under the spell of Emma Hamilton. He made some very callous decisions, at this time, concerning the treatment of prisoners of war and there was a faction that wanted him tried for war crimes, although this came to nothing. Sir William and Lady Hamilton together with Nelson travelled overland back to England and in 1801 Nelson took his seat in the House of Lords, separated from his wife Fanny and was appointed Vice Admiral of the Blue. Emma gave birth to a daughter named Horatia who was said to be the adopted offspring of one of Nelson's seamen.

In 1801 Nelson sailed to the Baltic with Admiral Hyde Parker's fleet to take Copenhagen. During Nelson's successful and bloody prosecution of this battle the famous blind eye incident occurred when he ignored Admiral Hyde Parker's signal to withdraw. As a result of his success he was made Viscount. On returning to England Nelson was again ill with what was probably recurrent malaria. Nelson and the Hamiltons bought Merton Place, a grand house near London. In 1802 they made their famous progression through South Wales and in 1803 William Hamilton died.

Once more, war was declared with France and Nelson was made Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. During the ensuing two years Nelson was at sea for all but two weeks which he spent at Merton with Emma when they went through a form of marriage ceremony. As he set out to sea for the last time he complained, "Of a sort of rheumatic fever, blood rushing up the side of my head at the moment it covers my brain I am asleep I have yet violent pains and night sweats". He was said to look, "very ill and neither in looks and dress to betoken the naval hero".

Having chased the combined Spanish and French fleet to and fro across the Atlantic they met at Trafalgar Bay and Nelson hoisted his famous signal, "England expects every man will do his duty". At 1:30 in the afternoon a shot from the mizzen tops of *La Redoutable* hit Nelson in the left shoulder he was carried below to the orlop deck where he died just after he knew that the French fleet had surrendered.

The musket ball had entered the left chest cavity just in front of the acromion process, it descended through the thorax fracturing the second and third ribs penetrating the left lung and dividing a large branch of the pulmonary artery before it came to rest between the sixth and seventh thoracic of vertebrae. Nelson's last words were "Thank God I have done my duty"