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# Rule the Waves

*A coterie of officers and British supremacy at sea.*

BY JOSEPH F. CALLO

**T**he Fleet Street journalist Tom Pocock was among the best recorders of Lord Nelson's heroic status.

Valiant yet vulnerable, Nelson has fascinated for two centuries. He continues to be the subject of books, paintings, plays. . . . He can seem a contemporary and it requires no great leap of the imagination to think of him being interviewed on television.

The part of Pocock's characterization about seeing Nelson as a contemporary gives us pause, because Nelson is generally frozen in his own time by those who write or talk about him. Too often the drive is for additional minutiae, rather than an analysis that lifts him out of his own era.

Arguably the most significant long-term result of Nelson's decisive victory at Trafalgar (October 21, 1805) was the establishment of Great Britain's dominance at sea. That global dominance was a key factor in a tumultuous era that included the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the beginning of the industrialization of war, and the expansion of the concept of representative government. And it lasted for a hundred years. The agent for the century-long British supremacy at sea was the Royal Navy, and although Admiral Nelson was the inspiration, it was those around him and those who followed immediately who were the human capital of British sea power after Trafalgar.

Enter author and retired Royal Navy captain Peter Hore, who has created an unconventional book that gets beyond the overly familiar chronology of Nelson's life and leads us to expand our thinking about the naval

*Joseph F. Callo is the author of John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior.*

**Nelson's Band of Brothers**  
*Lives and Memorials*  
by Peter Hore  
Naval Institute Press, 140 pp., \$48.95

officers who drove Britain's maritime ascendancy, and the institution that cultivated them. In his foreword, the former First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Jonathon Band describes the scope of the project: "This new volume comprehensively covers all those officers who commanded ships or squadrons of the fleets which fought under Nelson's tactical control at his three great sea battles." Then in the first chapter, Peter Hore adds a particularly thought-provoking point, an idea that quickly extends our perspective on Nelson:

While hundreds of books have been written about him, there is comparatively little about most of his contemporaries, and yet it would be a mistake to isolate him from the system, which was the Royal Navy, the most sophisticated administrative enterprise and largest industrial complex in the world.

Hore's merging of Nelson's greatest achievements at sea with the backgrounds of the officers he led in his three most important actions challenges us to see Nelson in a broad context. This blends concise and well-crafted descriptions of Nelson's victories at the battles of the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar with 80 mini-biographies of the naval officers Nelson commanded in those engagements. Hore handles the writing of the battle descriptions adroitly; a variety of authors (including descendants of Nelson's band of brothers) provide the mini-bios. What emerges is an extensive series of portrayals that provoke thoughts, not only of Nelson, but of the assemblage of naval leaders that was

an engine of global change.

Captain Thomas Foley is one of the standouts among those featured here. His performance at the Battle of the Nile is a particularly interesting example of how Nelson's relationships with those he led not only had an immediate effect in combat but also a significant ripple effect as well. Foley entered the Navy at age 13. As he advanced, he served in numerous global theaters and fought in limited engagements and large-scale battles. He reached the rank of post-captain in 1790, and he and his ship HMS *Goliath* joined Nelson in the Mediterranean in 1798. In August of that year, after a frantic search for the French fleet bearing Napoleon, Nelson came upon the major French warships in Aboukir Bay, just northeast of Alexandria, where Napoleon and his army had just disembarked.

It was somewhat unusual to initiate an attack in late afternoon, but Nelson immediately entered the bay in a single line-ahead formation. Foley, in *Goliath*, led the formation of 13 ships-of-the-line that Nelson commanded as it drove towards the French ships anchored along the shore. Nelson, as was usual at that time for the senior officer in such an action, was in the middle of the British line as it approached the French ships. Records suggest that neither Nelson nor Foley was very familiar with the anchorage.

Foley had the option of turning down the seaward side of the enemy ships or the landward side. In the latter case, there was a real danger—perhaps even a probability—of running aground. That would have been disastrous and in all likelihood would have changed the outcome of the battle—and delayed, or even prevented, the eventual demise of Napoleon as a global influence. On the other hand, getting some British ships between the French ships and the shore would create a huge tactical advantage for the British. The decision that Foley faced would bear directly on the battle's outcome—and the shape of history to come. It was a critical choice.

As usual, Nelson's captains were well briefed on the tactics he intended to use. He made it clear, for example, that he intended to concentrate initially on the front half of the French position. Thus, Foley expected no signal from his commander in chief, and he unhesitatingly turned down the landward side of the enemy ships. Foley was followed by four of his colleagues, who could see by his action that there was adequate room between the French fleet and shore for their passage. With Nelson's planning and Foley's decision, the British fleet quickly "doubled" the first half of the French line, enabling the British to destroy their enemy piecemeal. The result was an unambiguous British victory.

Admiral Nelson reported the results of the action to his commander in chief in unequivocal terms: "Almighty God has blessed his Majesty's Arms in the late Battle of the Nile by a great victory over the Fleet of the Enemy." As he viewed the debris-littered scene, he also hinted at the long-term implications of his success: "Victory is not a name strong enough for such a scene." And Nelson was right: The strategic result of his victory in the Battle of the Nile was that major French naval initiatives in the Mediterranean were thwarted, and Napoleon was eventually forced to abandon his objective of threatening Britain by attacking its trade, particularly trade with India.

As it turned out, Foley's on the spot, high-risk decision was essential to a major strategic power shift in Britain's direction. And Foley made that decision because he knew it would have been Nelson's choice if he had been on *Goliath's* quarterdeck. Foley's action was consistent with Nelson's well-established combat doctrine: "The boldest measures are the safest." He also knew that Nelson would protect Foley's naval career if he ran aground. Foley's decision is generally mentioned in accounts of the Battle of the Nile, but seldom is the broad basis of that decision—its link to Nelson's combat doctrine, and its long-term influence on future



*'The Death of Nelson' (1807) by Arthur William Devis*

concepts of military leadership—drawn out.

Thomas Masterman Hardy, who was with Nelson at the Nile, as well as Copenhagen and Trafalgar, is another intriguing example of the captains and junior admirals Nelson led into battle. Hardy was a seaman's seaman, born in Dorset in 1769 and present at all of Nelson's major fleet actions, including Trafalgar. He was on HMS *Victory's* quarterdeck when Nelson was mortally wounded. (Moments before he was struck down by a musket shot, Nelson had commented to his flag captain: "This is too warm work to last, Hardy.") Hardy also visited and spoke with Nelson several times while Nelson was being treated with the other wounded, and was with him when Nelson spoke his last words—whispered by Nelson directly to his friend: "God bless you, Hardy."

Hardy's role in these dramatic events, however, is only half the story. The other half is Hardy's longevity and ongoing influence on the institution of the Royal Navy. He lived well into the 19th century, hauling down his admiral's flag in 1827. During the two decades after Trafalgar he had an opportunity to preach and practice the leadership principles he had

absorbed from Nelson and that had become embedded—first in Nelson's band of brothers and then in their followers in the Royal Navy. Hardy was interested in the introduction of steam propulsion for warships and served long enough to see the United States Navy come of age in the War of 1812 and the advent of the Monroe Doctrine (1823). In 1830, he became first naval lord.

*Nelson's Band of Brothers* is an apt title for Peter Hore's unusual study. It is not so much about the heroics of the major naval actions of an era as it is about the naval professionals who were linked by understanding and mutual trust, and who gave focus and momentum to a century-long series of pivots in history. Nelson and his naval brothers were the founding fathers of British sea power and major factors in the radical economic and geopolitical changes of the 19th century. •