

# The death of Nelson at Trafalgar

*Harold Ellis*

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the most famous naval battle in British history – the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21 1805 – and with it the poignant fatal wounding of Horatio Nelson.

To the medical profession, and surgeons in particular, Nelson has a special fascination, not only as a great national hero, but also as the most frequently wounded flag officer in the history of the Royal Navy. Nelson's first wound was sustained at the age of 35 years at the siege of Bastia in Corsica in April 1794. After 4 days of bombardment, Nelson and four other men went forward on foot to examine the damage to the citadel. A cannon shot killed the Corsican guide and fatally wounded Captain Clarke, standing at Nelson's right side. Nelson was also injured but did not report it officially, merely telling his wife in a letter 4 months later that he had received 'a sharp cut in the back'.

The second wound was also sustained in Corsica, 3 months later, at the siege of Calvi. On 12 July Nelson was hit on the face and chest by splinters, stones and sand from a wall struck by a cannon ball. He sustained lacerations to the face and a deep cut, which penetrated his right eyelid and damaged the eye ball.

In 1797 he appeared before a medical board of the Company of Surgeons, when it was stated that the injury he had received 3 years before was equal to the loss of the eye, even though the eye was externally normal. Of course, this was long before the invention of the ophthalmoscope and the actual condition which caused this blindness can only be guessed at. Possibilities include retinal detachment, optic atrophy or rupture of the choroid.

The third wound was sustained at the Battle of St Vincent, on St Valentine's Day 1797. During the boarding and capture of two Spanish warships, the

San Nicholas and the San Josef, Nelson sustained a wound on the left side of the abdominal wall. 'His hat had been shot away, his shirt and coat were in tatters and his countenance was freckled with the smoke of gunpowder'. His name appears on the casualty list, where it was noted that 'He was bruised but not obliged to quit the deck'. A lump the size of a fist, which was aggravated when he coughed, appeared at the site of the abdominal injury – presumably a post-traumatic hernia.

The same year, Nelson, now a Rear Admiral, planned to seize treasure ships in the harbour of Santa Cruz, Tenerife. He set off in July with a fleet of four ships of the line, three frigates and a cutter. Nelson led the armada of rowing boats, which set off from the mother ships on the night of 24 July. As the boats approached the jetty, they were met by a hail of cannon balls and musket fire from the waiting Spaniards, and there were heavy losses – among the first was Nelson himself. As he scrambled from the boat, drawing his sword with his right hand, a grape shot shattered his right humerus. 'I am shot through the arm, I am a dead man', he exclaimed.

His life was saved by his stepson, Josiah Nisbet, then a midshipman, who tore off his neckerchief to fashion a tourniquet, hoisted the Admiral back into the long boat and helped row him to safety on HMS Theseus. By now Nelson had recovered sufficiently to hoist himself onto the deck, saying 'Tell the surgeon to make haste and get his instruments. I know I must lose my right arm and the sooner it is off the better'. The surgeon was Thomas Eshelby, then aged 28 years. Eshelby's log, preserved at the Public Records Office, reads: 'Admiral Nelson, compound fracture of the right arm by a musket ball passing through a little above the elbow; an artery divided; the arm was immediately amputated.' Eshelby notes that two grains of opium were then given orally, probably equivalent to 6.5 mg of morphine.

Nelson made a rapid recovery, although he had a persistent sinus where the long silk ligature around the brachial artery emerged from the wound. In addition, he had severe pain in the stump, probably because the adjacent median nerve was incorporated in the ligature (we can forgive the surgeon operating by candlelight in a tossing ship). The ligature came away on December 3, with rapid healing of the sinus and great relief from the pain.

Within months Nelson was back at sea. On August 1 1798, he was wounded for the fifth time at his great victory, the Battle of the Nile, which effectively destroyed Napoleon's dream of conquering Egypt. He was struck by a piece of scrapshot over the right eye. The wound was strapped together and within a month was fully healed, although he was left with severe headaches.

The last, and fatal, wound was, of course, at Trafalgar. This vital battle frustrated Napoleon's plans for combining the French and Spanish fleets for the invasion of Britain. Nelson, wearing full uniform and all his decorations, was struck as he stood on the quarter-deck of HMS Victory by a musket shot

*Figure 1. Nelson's fatal wound at Trafalgar. From Orme (1806).*



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from a sniper on the French flagship Redoubtable. As he fell he exclaimed 'They have done for me at last. Yes, my back bone is shot through'. He was carried down to the cockpit and attended by his surgeon, Sir William Beatty. When Nelson told him he could feel a gush of blood every minute within his chest and had no movement or feeling in the lower part of his body, Beatty knew there was no hope.

The log of HMS Victory reads 'A victory having been reported to the Right Honourable Lord Viscount Nelson KB, and Commander in Chief, he died of his wound.'

Beatty's account of the autopsy notes that the ball entered the left shoulder in front of the acromion, entered the thorax, fracturing the second and third ribs then traversed the lung, severing a large branch of the

pulmonary artery, producing a haemothorax, passed between the sixth and seventh thoracic vertebrae, wounding the spinal cord, and finally lodged below the right scapula.

Nelson's state funeral at St Paul's Cathedral took place on January 9 1806. **HM**

Orme E (1806) *Graphic History of the Life, Exploits and Death of Horatio Nelson*. Longman, London