

Admiral Nelson's amputation

5 here is no doubt that the most famous amputation in British history was that performed on Horatio Nelson. This year marks its 210th anniversary.

In July 1797, Admiral Nelson set off from England with a fleet of four ships of the line, three frigates and a cutter to seize the treasure ships moored at Santa Cruz in Tenerife, one of the Canary islands. The plan was simple – a surprise landing at night on the harbour mole and a rush to seize the main square in the town. However, severe storms and unfavourable currents deprived the landing of any hope of surprise. Nevertheless Nelson personally led the little armada of rowing boats that set out from their mother ships.

As the boats approached the mole, at 1.30 am, the waiting Spaniards opened a murderous fire of cannon and muskets, there were heavy losses, and one of the first of these was Nelson. As he scrambled out of his boat, drawing his sword with his right hand, his right humerus was shattered, probably by grape shot – ‘I am shot through the arm – I am a dead man’, he exclaimed.

Nelson's life was saved by his stepson, Josiah Nisbet, a young midshipman, who tore off his neckerchief, tied it as a tourniquet around the shattered arm, hoisted Nelson back into the boat and helped row him and the other wounded back to his flagship, HMS Sea Horse.

In an act of remarkable chivalry, Nelson refused to be carried on board. He knew that on Sea Horse was Betsy Fremantle, the pregnant wife of Nelson's captain. He also knew that Fremantle was still somewhere on the beach and he refused to be seen by her in his wounded condition without being able to give her news of her husband (who was, indeed, wounded in the same action) ‘in case she might miscarry’.

Nelson insisted he be rowed on to the next ship, Theseus. By now he had recovered enough to hoist himself aboard – ‘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.’

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The surgeon on Theseus was Thomas Eshelby, aged 28 years. He was born in Thirsk, Yorkshire, qualified at Surgeon's Hall in 1791 and was promoted to surgeon fourth rate in 1794. Eshelby's assistant was Louis Remonier, a 24-year-old French Royalist refugee, who was serving in the Royal Navy as surgeon's mate.

The amputation was carried out in the cold cockpit of Theseus in the early hours of July 25 – by candle light with the ship tossing on the waves and to the sounds of the groans and cries of the other wounded.

Eshelby's log – still carefully preserved at the Public Records Office at Kew – records:

‘Admiral Nelson, 25th July. Compound fracture of the right arm by a musket ball passing thro' immediately above the elbow; an artery divided; the arm was immediately amputated.’

He was then given a pill of two grains of opium (probably equivalent to 6.5 mg of morphia).

When asked if he wanted his limb embalmed, Nelson replied ‘throw it into the hammock with that brave fellow who was killed beside me’. (Dead sailors were sewn into their hammocks for burial at sea.)

Eshelby and Remonier then dealt with the rest of the casualties – a second above-elbow amputation, a wound of chest and shoulder, a compound fracture of the radius, a gunshot wound of the stomach, a chest wound, a wound of the hand and four sailors rescued after their cutter sank. All recovered apart from the 22-year-old lieutenant with the stomach wound, who died 5 days later.

Nelson made a satisfactory recovery from his amputation, his notes record that he was given a dose of senna and jalap on the fifth postoperative day and one wonders whether his constipation was caused by the repeated doses of postoperative opium. However, he developed a persistent sinus where the long silk ligature around the brachial artery emerged from the wound. In addition, this ligature almost certainly incorporated the adjacent median nerve (an easy mistake to make if you amputate by candle-light in a tossing ship), since Nelson experienced great pain in the

stump. The ligature came away in the dressing on 3 December, after which the sinus healed and the pain was greatly relieved. On 8 December, Nelson, who was then lodging in Bond Street, sent a note to the vicar of St. George's Hanover Square which stated: ‘An officer desires to return thanks to Almighty God for his perfect recovery from a severe wound, and also for many mercies bestowed upon him.’

When the accounts came to be settled for Nelson's care, Thomas Eshelby received £36 and Louis Remonier 24 guineas for assisting at the operation and for sitting up a total of 14 nights with his patient.

Eshelby married Peggy Douglas in 1801. Her brother was a naval captain who, coincidentally, had also lost an arm at Tenerife. Of their seven children, one became a naval surgeon and another a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Eshelby died at Plymouth in 1811, aged 41, then being surgeon on HMS Caton. **BJHM**

Figure 1 is reproduced from Orme (1806) by kind permission.

Conflict of interest: none.

Further reading

Ellis H (1994) *Surgical Case Histories from the Past*. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London
Orme E (1806) *Orme's Graphic History of the Life, Exploits and Death of Horatio Nelson*. Edward Orme, London

Figure 1. Nelson wounded at Tenerife. Josiah Nisbet has used his neckerchief as a tourniquet.

