

Napoleon's Threatened Invasion of England 1803-1804

During 1803 and 1804, a French invasion was expected on an almost hourly basis. This fear of invasion was at its height 1803 when Napoleon Bonaparte turned his full attention to invading England, saying: *"All my thoughts are directed towards England."*

Invasion plans were on a bigger scale than in 1798. Napoleon assembled the Grande Armée of 130,000 men at Boulogne with a flotilla of 2000 transport craft. *"Let us be masters of the Channel for six hours and we are masters of the world... I want only for a favourable wind to plant the Imperial Eagle on the Tower of London."*

Napoleon realized that there was no way to defeat the immense naval power of Britain on the high seas. A plan for a land invasion was necessary; Bonaparte's administration knew clearly well that although Britain was a giant on the sea they were weak on land with an army that numbered less than one hundred thousand regulars. If only Napoleon could get his superior land forces onto British soil, his victory seemed almost certain. Invasion plans were drawn up accordingly in order to maximize the French infantry's strength.

In staging this mass exodus of French infantry into the British homeland Napoleon quickly realized that in order for any land invasion to work he must gain complete control of the English Channel. He had to have complete dominance over this waterway so that the British Navy would be unable to disrupt his invasion flotilla. Without this assurance, the size of his invasion force would be irrelevant if the British fleet was able to pick off every member of his "grand armée" as they attempted to set foot on the shoreline.

In order to make sure that the Channel would stay under his control, Napoleon concocted a plan to team up with his allied Spanish fleets in the Mediterranean and then use this combined force to break through the British Navy stationed in the English Channel. At the first outset of the struggle however, Admiral Villeneuve, the commander of the Spanish fleet, seemed to lose his nerve; after an initial confrontation with Horatio Nelson's British fleet, Villeneuve sailed his forces back to Spain.

Initially this seemed to work in Napoleon's favour, as a large contingent of Nelson's navy left the English Channel to actively pursue the Spanish fleet. This left the Channel's own naval protection drastically reduced. Meanwhile, Napoleon's own intelligence reports seemed to confirm that six main British ships were docked in Gibraltar off the southern shores of Spain.

Perceiving an opportunity to strike, Napoleon galvanized his resolve and committed his remaining forces to engage the British fleet in the Channel. Additionally, Admiral Villeneuve cancelled his retreat, ordering his own forces to join up with Napoleon's. The combined Franco-Spanish armada is said to have stretched out five miles long as Nelson's fleet came near. The battle soon turned into a swirling chaos of cannon fire without any immediate sign of who

would gain the other hand. Finally, in one dramatic instance in the middle of the chaos the British ship *Victory* managed to lock masts with the French vessel *Redoubtable*.

This action would prove to be a bit misguided for the British and ultimately fatal for their commander, Horatio Nelson. The crew of the *Redoubtable* contained a crack unit of French infantry and sharpshooters. As soon as these two ships locked the French were more than ready to attempt to board and take over the British ship. However, a sharpshooter on the mizzen top of the *Redoubtable* showed mettle by dealing Horatio Nelson a deadly blow, firing a musket ball right through his left shoulder, and shattering his spine. The bullet finally came to rest in Nelson's right scapula.

As soon as he was hit, the legendary war veteran could be heard exclaiming, "*They finally succeeded, I am dead!*" However, Nelson didn't die instantly. As the battle raged, his wounded form could be seen hurriedly being carried below decks. At this point, due to French grenades being thrown at them and the threat of the French infantry boarding the ship, the *Victory's* gunners stopped firing and rushed to the deck of the ship.

As bleak as things may have seemed however, the beleaguered ship's salvation seemed to be on the horizon when the British freighter *Temeraire* joined the meleé. In the midst of their attempts to storm the deck of the *Victory*, the French crew was caught off guard as the *Temeraire* began to fire mercilessly at their exposed positions on the deck of their ship. This bombardment directly into the crowd of the unsheltered French infantry resulted in many casualties, and of the 643 member crew, only 99 men were said to be left fully intact; the rest were either dead or severely wounded.

Among the maimed and wounded from the explosive fury of the *Temeraire* was the French ship's own captain who issued a quick and unconditional surrender. The battle continued on with several more instances of French ships being overwhelmed in the same fashion until the Franco-Spanish fleet that was meant to be the invasion force of England was finally repulsed and defeated. It is said that as the wounded Horatio Nelson lay dying he approved of the British victory of Trafalgar - his dying words were to tell his subordinates, "*Thank God I have done my duty.*"

The Battle of Trafalgar would signal the end of Napoleon's challenge to Britain's naval power and would cause him to once again turn his eyes toward war with continental Europe.

History, Hourly. Napoleon: A Life From Beginning To End (Military Biographies Book 1) (p. 23).