

ANNEX 25

RODNEY CARLISLE, PH. D.

THE COMMAND OF THE OCEAN

A Naval History of Britain
1649–1815

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four years before, he was specifically ordered not to leave the mouth of the Channel open by chasing off to Ireland unless he was sure the French had really gone that way. The same point was made by instructions issued by Melville in the summer of 1804. The great difficulty of the blockade was that there were too few ships to maintain it, for by demobilizing the fleet and disrupting the dockyards St Vincent had eliminated any margin of superiority. 'The French Navy is daily increasing, both at Toulon and Brest,' Nelson wrote in July,

whilst ours is as clearly going down-hill. It will require all Lord Melville's abilities to get our fleet ahead of that of the French. We made use of the peace, not to recruit our Navy, but to be the cause of its ruin.¹¹

In September 1804 Melville calculated that he had seventy ships of the line available in home waters, of which Cornwallis had forty-four, which sufficed to keep seven on station off Rochefort, another seven off Ferrol, and sixteen off Brest – to watch twenty-one inside. There was no margin to spare for losses, and Cornwallis was ordered to run no undue risks with winter gales.¹²

You have not the means of sustaining the necessary extent of naval force, if your ships are to be torn to pieces by an eternal conflict with the elements during the tempestuous months of winter, and allow me to remind you that the occasions when we have been able to bring our enemy to battle and our fleets to victory have generally been when we were at a distance from the blockading station.¹³

The squadron off Ferrol was needed to watch five French ships of the line, returning from the West Indies on the outbreak of war, which had taken refuge there. Spain was still neutral, and it was worth Britain making every effort to keep her out of the war when the Spanish fleet held the balance of power. This made the blockade of Ferrol a matter of diplomatic as well as operational delicacy. Pellew handled it with great skill, establishing a convenient anchorage in a neighbouring bay where he maintained cordial relations with the Spaniards, and a close watch on the French. In May 1804 he handed over to Rear-Admiral the Hon. A. F. I. Cochrane, a talented officer with his family's established talent for making enemies, and relations with the Spaniards soon broke down. Cochrane assured Melville that Spain was determined to go to war, and only awaited the arrival of a squadron of frigates bearing treasure from South America to declare it. This intelligence determined the Cabinet to seize this treasure. Four frigates under Captain Graham Moore successfully intercepted the Spanish squadron off Cadiz on 6 October: three ships were captured and a fourth blew up, killing among

others the wife and daughters of a returning Spanish governor. The operation was well executed, but whether it was wise or right is another question. If the attack had to be made, it would have been better in overwhelming force, to which Spanish officers might decently have surrendered without bloodshed. As it was, Rear-Admiral Bustamante, an officer of honour and ability, could not possibly avoid fighting, unprepared as he was. This attack, delivered without warning or declaration of war, in which many innocents perished, was bound to blacken Britain's reputation, inflame Spanish feelings, and make war swift and certain which otherwise might have been deferred, though probably not avoided.¹⁴

The Spanish declaration of war in December 1804 transformed Napoleon's strategic calculations, doubling his fleet to 102 ships of the line, against eighty-three British in seagoing condition. Moreover, though Napoleon would certainly not have admitted it, the quality of the Spanish navy was in several respects, especially the professional calibre of its officers, clearly superior to that of the French. The promising French officers brought forward by the Jacobin government ten years before had been got rid of, and replaced by former noblemen, experienced but demoralized and cynical, who were prepared to serve as the emperor's lackeys. Vice-Admiral Latouche-Tréville, the last of Napoleon's senior sea officers with a mind of his own, died commanding the Toulon fleet in August 1804. After that the French navy was dominated by the *quartern d'Aboukir*, the 'Nile Quartet', as they were known: Decrès, Bruix, Ganteaume and Villeneuve, all men indelibly associated with the catastrophe of 1798, who could be relied upon not to offend the imperial ears with unwelcome truths.¹⁵

Even before the Spanish fleet was available, Napoleon was planning naval operations. In July 1804 Latouche-Tréville was to take the Toulon fleet via Rochefort and Cherbourg to Boulogne. This plan was cancelled on the admiral's death. It was followed by no fewer than eight major plans involving the co-ordinated movements of many fleets, ordered in the twelve months between September 1804 and September 1805. All of them addressed the central problem of Napoleon's naval strategy: the fleets available to him were superior in total numbers, but divided between Toulon, Cartagena, Cadiz, Ferrol, Rochefort, Brest and the Texel. The first essential was therefore to unite all, or as many as possible, of these squadrons. All Napoleon's plans had certain features in common. They assumed that blockaded squadrons would be able to escape at a moment of the emperor's choosing, and make long sea passages at high speed to very precise timetables. They assumed that wind, sea and tide would obey his requirements. They assumed that the enemy

would do nothing and understand nothing, or only those things which suited Napoleon's convenience. Finally, these plans had one more factor in common; each was cancelled before the orders for the previous one had been carried out, or even received. The result was progressively deepening confusion, with different squadrons attempting to conform to different plans at the same time, and the emperor himself (who had no naval staff, and used Decrès as a mere secretary) growing muddled and careless.¹⁶

Napoleon's third scheme of December 1804 was the first which generated actual operations. It called for the Toulon fleet, now commanded by Villeneuve, to cruise to South America and the Caribbean, where it would meet the Rochefort squadron and return to French Channel ports. The British blockading squadrons would meanwhile have been decoyed to the West Indies or somewhere else, leaving the coast clear. On 11 January 1805, in very bad weather, Rear-Admiral Missiessy succeeded in getting out of Rochefort with four ships of the line and 3,500 troops, setting course for the West Indies in accordance with this plan. On the 14th Villeneuve sailed from Toulon – and two days later, unknown to either of them, Napoleon cancelled the plan. In the Mediterranean Nelson fell back on Sicily, the essential position to block the way to the Levant. Once assured by his cruisers that the French had not gone westward, Nelson swept around the whole basin of the eastern Mediterranean to be sure they had not got past him in that direction. Back at Malta on 19 February, he learnt that Villeneuve, damaged by bad weather, had returned to Toulon.¹⁷ As soon as he was back in port, Villeneuve wrote to Decrès asking to resign his command. 'I should like to point out to you that about all one can expect from a career in the French navy today is shame and confusion . . . under no circumstances do I intend to become the laughing stock of Europe by being involved in further disasters.'¹⁸ 'I really believe your admiral does not know how to command,' Napoleon wrote privately to General Lauriston, commanding the troops embarked, whom he used as a sort of military commissar or shadow commander-in-chief,¹⁹ with orders 'constantly to renew our admirals' energy and resolution to carry things through, without allowing themselves to be deterred as easily as they usually are'.²⁰ But Napoleon and Decrès did not have, and clearly did not really want, an admiral of spirit to command the fleet, and Villeneuve himself was ordered to remain.

At the end of February Napoleon issued a new invasion scheme, the fifth. Under this Ganteaume was to sail from Brest, collect the French and Spanish ships from Ferrol, and meet Villeneuve from Toulon at Martinique, where Missiessy would also be waiting. The combined fleet (under Ganteaume's