

**CN Trafalgar Night Address 2015**  
**Royal Automobile Club Sydney**

Ladies and Gentlemen

Ninety years after the Trafalgar campaign and Nelson's death, Captain Alfred Mahan, United States Navy, the great American prophet of Sea Power, wrote of the Royal Navy's part in the allied victory over Napoleon. In a telling sentence he characterised the British Fleet as being:

*That far distant line of storm beaten ships upon which the Grand Army of France never looked, but which stood between it and the dominion of the world.*

That simple sentence still describes the central fact about maritime power, which is that it can only be exercised when fleets are at sea. That is an indisputable and eternal truth and has not changed since the Athenians and the Persians first fought from ships two and half thousand years ago.

I shall return to that theme of the availability of ships, and their capacity to influence events ashore, later on in this address.

But first, thank you for the opportunity for Jenny and I to dine with you tonight. It is a great pleasure to be invited to speak in this historic club and in this magnificent room.

I am delighted to see so many old friends gathered here and congratulate Ralph and his team on organising this important annual dinner.

This is a Trafalgar Night address and before I close I shall be remembering what we owe to the immortal memory of Horatio Lord Nelson; the greatest fighting sailor of his, or any other, generation.

But there are other matters of which I wish to speak to you tonight as well.

Count Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor of Germany, once shrewdly remarked: *'Only a fool learns from his own mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others!'*

Learning from others successes and failures is the beginning of wisdom for any naval officer at every career point from Midshipman to Flag rank.

Generations of naval officers studied and learned lessons in leadership from Nelson and from his unsurpassed record of victories.

But many have not appreciated that Nelson was a revolutionary figure, not content to only emulate others, but always looking for new and innovative means to achieve his purposes.

He believed that history should be put to good use not just be an end in itself.

So tonight in that spirit I shall begin by comparing and contrasting the Navy of Nelson's age of Fighting Sail with the Navy I lead. I shall consider what has changed and what has remained constant over more than two centuries.

Later I shall also contrast the strategic situation in which Britain was engaged when fighting Napoleonic France, with our own very different circumstances.

So to set the scene let me start with the points of similarity and difference between the ships and people under Nelson's command, and their capabilities, with those of our 21<sup>st</sup> century Navy.

Building and supplying the Royal Navy of the late eighteenth century was the largest single industry in Britain, possibly in Europe. In wartime the Fleet took by far the largest slice of Britain's annual budget.

Taxation rose to meet the needs of the Navy. Unsurprisingly that was not popular but it was the only efficient means for getting an effective fleet to sea and sustaining it there.

The Navy was a great national enterprise and it was understood that the ships of the line were in the phrase of the day: *the Wooden Walls of England* and that they were indispensable to national security.

We are recapitalizing our fleet over the next decade. It has already started. It is not, and will not, be cheap. It is a great national enterprise. We will be commencing a new era of continuous shipbuilding so that we have a production line of new vessels replacing older ones without interruption.

There will be critics concerned about what we are spending our tax dollars on and how much we are spending. That has not changed in two centuries!

Technology moved slowly in the age of sail and so ships stayed in commission and ready for action for decades. HMS *Victory* was first commissioned nearly fifty years before she fought at Trafalgar.

By contrast our own new battle cruiser HMAS *Australia* was technologically obsolete just ten years after she arrived in Sydney harbour in 1913.

The only way we can keep our modern fleet fit for purpose in the digital age is by retrofitting them with new technology, as we are currently doing with the ANZAC class of frigates.

Our ships cannot go in harm's way if they cannot see and strike before they are seen and hit. That means they must have the state of the art capabilities. It is that simple -and complex

Nelson's ships were designed to be lethal, - and so are ours – but his fall of iron shot was limited to a few hundred yards.

We can precision guide smart munitions onto 'over the horizon' targets in a way unimaginable in an age when broadsides were often fired when ships were locked together muzzle to muzzle in close combat.

Our six Collins Class submarines possess very long range strike capabilities. That is why they have deterrent power and why they will be replaced by boats with even greater striking power and advanced capabilities in due course.

Nelson officers' situational awareness was limited by the range of the 'Mark One human eyeball' on a clear day with a telescope!

Now a warfare officer can see digitally over the horizon, using space-based assets and he or she can see what every other warfare officer in our fleet can see.

We can network our response to a threat using interconnected combat systems that can plumb the depths with sonar. We can track and strike simultaneous targets skimming the surface at lighting speed.

We can do this while degrading and disrupting an enemy's ability to see and target us.

Darkness is irrelevant to us in the digital age - whereas fighting at night, as Nelson did at the Battle of the Nile, was a rare and difficult event.

Nelson complained that he never had enough fast frigates because they were the eyes of his battle fleet with which he could gather intelligence and communicate with his superiors and subordinates.

I know how he felt! No modern Chief of Navy has ever thought he had enough frigates or patrol boats or helicopters to achieve the mission.

However our aviation capability is being transformed by the new large amphibious ships HMAS *Canberra* and *Adelaide*. They are a game changer for the Navy and the ADF.

Nelson's fleet operated in one dimension - the surface. We can operate on the surface, in the water column, in the air above us, in space and now in cyberspace. This is like playing three dimensional chess compared with the simplicity of Nelson's battle space.

At Trafalgar his genius lay in breaking the French and Spanish line with two columns of ships sailing at right angles to the enemy line and bringing on a full fleet engagement.

What he needed was boldness, an ability to endure enemy fire, and a breeze strong enough to carry his great ships into the enemy's flanks.

As the British ships successively broke the enemy line his gunners could pour round shot and canister through the stern galleries of the French and Spanish ships.

This revolutionary tactic devastated the enemy's gun decks with a single accurate broadside from which many ships never recovered.

There are no half measures in naval warfare.

Nelson once wrote that: *Time is everything. A battle is won or lost in as little as five minutes.* That is profoundly true of warfare in our digital age of instantaneous communication and decision taking.

We are not in the bloody business of war at sea at present and I trust we never will be again, - though, sadly, I cannot guarantee that.

We are not engaged in battle or blockade. We are not Mahan's "line of distant storm beaten ships."

Our mission, in peace time, is to provide security, as the naval prayer tells us: *for those who pass on the seas on their lawful occasions.*

Our ships at sea are an expression of Australia's will to remain a well respected medium naval power in the region.

We are engaged in constabulary and diplomatic tasks. But these rest on our capability to engage in high end warfare. We operate with allies to shape the maritime domain and maintain its freedom for those who use it for commercial activities.

And lets not forget Nelson was once a member of the RN's Fishery Protection Squadron. We also do marine resource protection.

In addition to engaging in main battle Britain's fleets in Nelson's era were also instruments of national political power used to win friends and build alliances.

Nelson's ships of the line did not anchor in the Bay of Naples after the victory at the Battle of the Nile so Nelson could meet Emma Hamilton, as popular romance and the cinema would have us believe!

The British fleet was there to shore up the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily in the fight against the common enemy - the military adventurer Bonaparte – who had not yet crowned himself the Emperor Napoleon, - but was a menace to the existing order in Europe.

He had seized northern Italy and was threatening to take the rest of the peninsula and dominate the Mediterranean. The King of Naples needed the support the British fleet provided.

The RAN as part of the ADF is also engaged in the maintenance of strategic alliances. We win friends and influence Governments wherever we go.

We exercise with our allies and our regional friends.

We demonstrate deterrence to those who might otherwise think that we lack resolve and capability to protect our maritime interests and the freedom of the seas.

Alliance maintenance is what we are doing when our ships and submarines go to RIMPAC, off Hawaii, to exercise with the USN and other navies.

Alliance building is also what we are doing when we invite many nations to join us for Exercise Talisman Sabre when we exercise our skills in conducting amphibious operations in northern Australia.

These are all essential strategic and diplomatic tasks.

Now I wish to speak of what Nelson called the greatest single factor in success in battle – our people. The Navy was then, and is now, an equal opportunity employer. It was never a class ridden hierarchy.

Social mobility was and is very possible for those who wish to seize opportunities.

Many a senior officer started naval life on the lower deck. Captain Arthur Phillip, first Governor of NSW, is one example.

James Cook is another example of a sailor who was commissioned from the lower deck due to his sheer professionalism as a navigator.

Nelson was a humble country parson's son. His great mentor Admiral Sir John Jervis started on the lower deck as an ordinary seaman.

At a time when a young man's wealthy father could buy him a colonelcy in the British army the Royal Navy required a Midshipman to pass rigorous exams and to demonstrate he was a competent seaman and navigator before he could be promoted to Lieutenant.

Nelson had sailed 45,000 miles before his Lieutenancy was confirmed.

Ships and lives were too valuable to be put in the hands of those who lacked prudence or professional competence. That remains true to this day for our men and women.

Nelson wrote that: "Duty is the great business of sea officers." That is always true in every generation.

Nelson also once said that he never did anything just for the sake of tradition unless there was also another good reason to support doing it as well.

He was a radical moderniser of the naval culture. In the matter of discipline and the management of morale he was ahead of the times he lived in.

One of his captains, his Band of Brothers, wrote: *'He is so good and pleasant man that we all wish to do what he likes without any kind of orders.'*

His leadership style was perhaps most evident in his relationship with seamen. After success in battle it was his custom to walk the gun decks shaking the hands of seamen and thanking them: - a memorable gesture and appreciated by them.

After the battle of the Nile, he had his captains forgive all seamen on disciplinary charges.

He also moved with the times, as we do, to establish new traditions for the navy and provide contemporary meaning to the old ones.

He invented new tactics to make best use of new technical capabilities.

For example he knew that the new 68 pounder heavy guns called carronades, carried on poops and forecastles, would cause havoc on the decks of enemy ships once he broke the line at Trafalgar.

To clarify signals he distributed 50 copies of the new 1805 signal code with him when he returned to the fleet for the last time.

Nelson performed at the cutting edge of naval technology.

Cultural change in old institutions is never easy. There are plenty of people who can tell me why I can't change the way we do business and our naval traditions for any number of reasons.

But we are at the start of the greatest peacetime expansion of the fleet since 1913 and I need to bring into the Navy all the clever, keen men and women that will volunteer for service from every demographic.

Diversity is strength. Multicultural Australia needs and must have a multicultural ADF. It is the right thing to do, but it is also very necessary for our future capability to recruit diversity.

We cannot afford to miss out on all the talent and potential to be found in Australians of non Anglo-Celtic ethnicity.

We need them if I, and my successors, are going to man our new fleet and operate it to its full potential, and if that means some traditions that are no longer useful need to be changed so be it.

I need ships to be available, seaworthy, battle ready and carrying their full complement of highly trained and qualified Australians who are team players fully integrated into their ship's companies.

That means that recruits must, and increasingly do, come from every ethnicity. Gender is not a barrier, indeed it is a strength. If I, and my successors, can't recruit and retain our people we will fail to provide the Government with the fleet capability that it requires.

If our smart ships are our hardware then our sailors are the smart software to drive them and they have new expectations for a new age.

Unlike the Press Gangs that tricked and bribed young men into the ships that Nelson and his Band of Brothers commanded, I am in the happy position of being able to offer among the best pay and conditions and allowances available anywhere in the world to our volunteers for naval service

This is not only just, it is also necessary, if we are to compete for the nation's best and brightest in each generation.

That may mean breaking with the idea that the only way into the Navy lies through the long apprenticeship of junior ranks.

My strategic plan for Navy is called Plan Pelorus and it prepares Navy to be a Task Force focussed fleet equipped and manned to meet the challenges to maritime security in our region that may come in this unpredictable new century.

Much is asked of our men and women. It always has been. Many of you recall the privations of life at sea from your own years of service.

But these are not the simple men and boys of Nelson's gun decks, or even the much better educated sailors of World War I and II.

Our sailors are often highly qualified and skilled technicians most of whom are free to take their talents to where they can be very well remunerated.

Some of our new entry sailors come to us with university degrees. To keep such men and women serving we need to ensure that in addition to remuneration there is pride in the work and confidence in the Navy's leadership.

That is the work culture people stay around for, or return for, after time outside the Navy. That is the culture that Plan Pelorus is building.

It is important that Australians value their Navy, know what its purpose is and admire the people who serve in it.

Public recognition is a powerful motivator of high morale and that is a better predictor of retention than money alone will ever be.

Now I speak of Leadership. Nelson was a charismatic leader whose reputation and example had a profound impact on the morale and fighting spirit of ordinary men, many of whom he had never met.

The phrase “the Nelson touch” was much used after his death. It was not just a description of his tactics which led to repeated success in battle or his inspirational signal at Trafalgar.

From a sailor’s viewpoint Nelson was the whole package: personal courage in the face of the enemy, aggression and skill in battle, but also humanity, consideration and personal warmth towards those who served under him. He also ensured good food and plenty of it.

After Trafalgar was won news of Nelson’s death went through the British fleet. It was noted that sailors who had “fought like lions sat down and wept like children for their dead commander.”

He was one of them. He was no plaster saint,- and neither were they. He put his life at risk in every action he had ever been in - and so had they. Like many of them he carried his battle scars from one ship to another, like a ship’s cat that had been in many a fight.

Nelson, lacking an arm and an eye, was a vulnerable, almost fragile, figure who excited men’s protective instinct - never more so than when he and Hardy calmly paced *Victory*’s quarterdeck under fire.

His men and the nation loved him for his bravery. Sailors cared deeply that he was gone from their lives. The nation had lost its saviour and hero. They had lost a friend and commander.

That is leadership on a grand scale which has rarely been equalled by a naval commander and never, I think, exceeded. In his final prayer he spoke of his wish for: humanity after victory to be the predominant feature of the British Fleet. That enlightened intention speaks to us across the centuries.

Now I move from the personal and the tactical to the strategic and the political.

Trafalgar was not just a single battle it was a long campaign. It lasted for six months and covered an area from Brest to Boulogne, Toulon to Trinidad, Jamaica to Gibraltar.

The Battle off Cape Trafalgar was the climactic final act to this maritime drama.

It was an annihilating victory but the contest was not just about a naval battle won and ships captured. The real prize was the use of the sea as a battle space until Waterloo was won in 1815.

In 1804 Sir John Jervis, the First Sea Lord, knew all about Napoleon's invasion plans and his collection of Rhine river barges waiting in French Channel ports. He knew that they were highly unsuitable for passage of troops to England.

He also knew the Channel fleet was at sea watching and waiting for any French fleet aiming to get to Boulogne to escort those unseaworthy barges to invade the English south coast.

Jervis famously remarked: *I do not say they cannot come. I only say that they cannot come by sea.* He was right. His Navy always commanded the English channel.

After Waterloo when Napoleon was a prisoner onboard HMS *Bellerophon* sailing to his last exile on St Helena, he told her captain that he could have been master of the world if it had not been for British ships preventing him.

Finally the great land commander understood the utility of sea power to a nation that possesses it.

We can return now to that "line of distant storm beaten ships" with which I started, - to the purpose of navies, then and now, and the role of sea power in our national life.

We can ask what does that twenty year long saga of fleet movements, pursuits, battles and blockades. long ago. tell us about maritime power today? How is that history useful? What can we learn by looking into that distant mirror?

I believe that the Trafalgar Campaign tells us an enduring truth. It is that sea power always matters to an island state – like ours.

This is true whether that state, like Britain in 1805, was under threat of invasion, or, like Australia in 1942 , when the threat was not outright invasion, but was control of our trade routes to our allies.

What else can we see in that distant mirror. What does 1805 say about Sea power in 2015?

Well, this year in response to a Chinese challenge to an American aircraft in international airspace US Defence Secretary Ash Carter stated unequivocally that the greatest Seapower on the planet wanted a peaceful solution to all disputes in the South China Sea but that: *the United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows.*

Maritime capability in our age is about being able to make such a statement of intention with credibility.

Those to whom such an unequivocal message is sent must know that a country that asserts right has the capability to back it up with ships and aircraft if it chooses to do so.

That is what Sea Power looks like in our increasingly interesting region.

What Secretary Carter said about the freedom of the sea being indivisible is a legacy of Trafalgar.

That victory over the Franco-Spanish fleet, ensured that for a century after the peace of 1815 the seas of the world would be free for the traders and immigrants to use to build the wealth of nations free from fear of interdiction by a hostile naval power.

Britain's Australian colonies were the direct beneficiaries of that freedom of the seas and Nelson was universally regarded as the architect of that freedom both in Britain and wherever British people settled across the Empire.

For that reason I believe that we can assert that Trafalgar was the most important battle for Australia in the nineteenth century.

For a century it was only the “raging of the sea” and not “the violence of the enemy” which was to be feared by those millions who came here from Europe in migrant ships.

All those who came to call Australia home were in debt to the Royal Navy and the hero of Trafalgar.

Nelson’s reputation has never diminished in the eyes of those who succeeded him in the Navy or in the memory of the nation he served. He remains the ultimate exemplar of the naval hero who puts duty first, far above the comforts of private life.

As he lay in *Victory*’s cockpit, in pain and beyond the help of surgeons, he wished us to know his last thoughts as he repeatedly said: *Thank God I have done my Duty.*

With that last thought of his in mind I ask you to rise and drink a toast to:

**Horatio Lord Nelson. The Immortal Memory**