

Trafalgar Dinner
Address by Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, AO, CSC, RAN
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17 October 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening. It is a distinct pleasure to dine with you this evening, to mark what will, in just a few days, be the 209th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar.

There is reason for us being here tonight; a great and significant purpose. Some might think it because the Royal Australian Navy has four serving Vice Admirals for the first time in its history but, however impressive, that is not why we're here. Some might think it because we can have an enjoyable evening together but, while I am sure we will, that is not why we're here. Some might think it so I can quiz you on which of the RAN's serving Vice Admirals is the same height as Lord Nelson – no pressure to get the right answer – but that is not why we are here.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the reason we are here tonight is because we are different; different by virtue of our membership of the naval profession of arms. While we are rightly part of a joint force, the Australian Defence Force, and while you attend a tri-service academy, you are still different from your army and air force peers. The value you will bring to the joint fight is your expertise, your skill, your mastery of warfare at sea – on, over, under and from the sea. Whether you are aircrew, supply, engineer, warfare officer, doctor, dentist or submariner, you are first and foremost a naval officer – it is a unique profession in its benefits and challenges – it is anything but ordinary and it is immensely important to Australia. So tonight we meet to celebrate what is special and unique about the naval profession of arms, to remember one of the greatest naval officers who ever lived and one of the greatest battles ever fought.

The Battle of Trafalgar is an action which demonstrates the actions of a Navy, the actions of a Fleet, the actions of the officers and sailors embarked in each and every ship. I believe the principles which are so clearly highlighted by Nelson and by his Fleet at Trafalgar remain as relevant now as they were then.

When I read about Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar, what sticks in my mind is the complexity of the story. The Franco-Spanish fleet in the port of

Cadiz were trying to join up with the remainder of the French fleet in the French port of Brest away to the north; all part of a plan by Napoleon to invade Britain. The British were trying to prevent that invasion by stopping the enemy fleet concentration. This campaign had last most of the year 1805, involved four major fleets and numerous detached squadrons and had reached from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean and all up and down Europe's Atlantic coast. For the British in particular, the campaign pushed their organisation to the limits as they had to keep large fleets at sea – supplied, maintained and repaired – and to do so in all weathers across a large theatre of operations.

When the 33 British ships shaped course towards the 40 ships of the Franco-Spanish Fleet on the 21st of October, after weeks of gales, the weather was calm. Deployed in two columns, the British sailed towards the enemy fleet which proceeded north in a single line. Instead of turning onto the same course as the French, Nelson's two columns moved slowly but inexorably toward the points either side of the French centre. Confident in the superior gunnery of the British Fleet, Nelson forced a vicious close-range engagement which commenced about midday and finished in the late afternoon. His tactical deployment and manoeuvring on approach meant the Franco-Spanish vanguard were unable to engage in the battle in time to be effective and allowed the British to concentrate to great effect. Nelson's tactical genius enabled a decisive victory.

The importance of warfighting at the tactical level is clear. But we must never forget the campaign of which Trafalgar was a part: a campaign that had chased the French and the Spanish from the seas; that had bottled them up in their harbours; and chipped away at their confidence and capability whenever the opportunity arose. The seamanship, the logistics, the engineering which made that campaign a success are just as much a part of the warfighting as the weapon firing on the day – a lesson we ignore at our peril.

We must also remember that as inspirational as he was, Nelson was one leader, one sailor, in a Navy of over 100,000. So when I look at Trafalgar, I do not just think of Nelson.

I think of the huge effort to save lives in the aftermath of the battle; friend and foe alike were united to ride out the gales which returned. They showed HONOUR.

I think of the sailors and what it took to live, work and fight in a ship-of-the-line: in HMS *Victory* the crew was about 850 in a ship which was about the same size as one of our Hydrographic Survey Ships, which has a crew of about 60!! They needed HONESTY.

I think of the hour during which they bore down on the Franco-Spanish Fleet, enduring the enemy fire, knowing of the savage fighting to come; of not just the officers in command, but the teams of sailors who made sail, manned the pumps and fought the guns. They had COURAGE.

I think of the ships to the rear of the British columns, which had great autonomy about how they played their role, whose crews continued into battle and attacked where their individual judgement indicated they might have the greatest impact. They displayed INTEGRITY.

I think of the hundreds and thousands of officers who led and inspired ships across the fleet and the commitment they showed to each other was remarkable, not just on the day of the battle, but in the months and weeks which preceded it, and in the years which followed. There was LOYALTY.

So yes, Trafalgar occurred a long time ago, on the other side of the world, before the Royal Australian Navy was conceived. But we should not dismiss it on that basis. It remains a relevant study into enduring features of our profession. It is worth the time to read and learn about it, to reflect on how and why it occurred. The culture that supports an effective Navy is not that different now to the way it was in Nelson's time: yes, the language has changed and men and women now play an equal role, but the truth about people remains. Our New Generation Navy has much in common with the values Nelson espoused. He spoke of the need for superior behaviour, honesty of purpose and consideration toward others; we speak of Honesty, Honour, Courage, Integrity and Loyalty.

Of course Trafalgar and Nelson are not the only places to go to learn about values and military effectiveness. You can learn much from the actions of the officers and sailors of the Royal Australian Navy, who may lack the fame, but lack nothing in courage and warfighting excellence: the courage of the crews of our first submarines, *AE1* and *AE2*; the sheer grit and determination of Scrap Iron Flotilla's engineers – *Stuart*, *Voyager*, *Vampire*, *Vendetta* and *Waterhen*; the forecandle crew of HMAS *Murchison* on the Han River; and the courage and compassion of our patrol boat crews.

The Royal Australian Navy's tradition of warfighting evolved from that of the Royal Navy and we have made it our own. Know your history and learn from it; there is a lot to be proud of and it is a mark of your professionalism.

The capabilities and platforms we are bringing into service are significant. The LHDs, the Seahawk Romeo combat helicopters, the *Hobart* class DDGs are all here or just around the corner – you will operate and in time command them. These are exciting times with demanding opportunities. You are going to need the same virtues Nelson had and I'd like you to say them with me: Honour, Honesty, Courage, Integrity and Loyalty.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it has been my honour to be a part of this great tradition. I have no doubt you too will play your part. To paraphrase Nelson, while some things will have to be left to chance, you will not go too far wrong if you aim to fight and win at sea. Ladies and Gentlemen, I invite you to stand for the toast to the Immortal Memory: the Immortal Memory of Lord Nelson and those who fell with him.