

## Nelson's Avenger at Trafalgar

Commander John Pollard RN of Cawsand, Cornwall  
by Jack Spence

In the hour before dawn on 21 October 1805, twenty miles southwest of Cape Trafalgar, Midshipman John Pollard lay awake in his hammock on the orlop deck of *HMS Victory*, flagship of Vice Admiral Lord Nelson, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. Pollard had been resting for just a few hours but had barely slept, anticipating the call to action at daybreak.

Two days earlier the enemy fleet had sailed from the nearby port of Cadiz. The British fleet set off in pursuit but the weather closed in and there was no chance of an engagement that day. By the afternoon of 20 October still no contact had been made when Nelson visited the poop deck of the *Victory* to address his midshipmen. Aware that the decisive engagement was at last imminent he said to them: "*This day or tomorrow will be a fortunate one for you, young men*", alluding to their being promoted in the event of a victory.

During the night the squalls had given way to a light breeze, and Pollard felt sure that the battle would take place in the hours ahead. Like most young men aboard the *Victory*, he had no experience of a titanic conflict at sea and could not have imagined the horrors of sixty men-of-war engaged in close range combat. In the darkness of the midshipmen's berth he had only a short time to reflect on the events that had led to him being aboard the *Victory* at Trafalgar on what was to be the greatest day in British naval history.

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John Pollard was born in 1786 in the fishing village of Cawsand at a time when smuggling had reached the peak of its prosperity. Cawsand was recognized as the centre of this illegal activity in Cornwall and although a few in the community grew rich from the proceeds, life for most was harsh and opportunities were few. The Pollards decided that John's future would be best served by a commitment to a naval career.

In November 1797 Britain had been at war for four years when, at the age of eleven, John Pollard enlisted in the Royal Navy and joined the *Havick* at Plymouth as a trainee midshipman. For three years the *Havick* patrolled the Channel until in November 1800 disaster struck when she was caught in a storm at Jersey, driven onto rocks and wrecked. Fortunately the crew was saved and Pollard returned to Plymouth. Following short periods aboard the warships *Cambridge*, *Hercules* and *Culloden*, he joined the 80-gun *Canopus* at Cawsand Bay and in June 1803 sailed to join Nelson at the blockade of Toulon.

In March 1805, after eighteen months patrolling the Mediterranean, Pollard transferred to the *Victory* as a signal midshipman. A month later the French fleet, commanded by Admiral Villeneuve, succeeded in escaping from Toulon. Nelson's fleet set off in chase but crossed the Atlantic and returned to Gibraltar without catching sight of the enemy. The *Victory* returned to England and within days Nelson received news that the French were now at Cadiz where Villeneuve had united with the Spanish to form a huge Combined Fleet of 33 warships. The *Victory*, with Midshipman John Pollard aboard, set sail for the Spanish coast where Nelson assumed command of the blockade of Cadiz.

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At 6.25 am on the 'fortunate day' that Nelson had predicted, John Pollard was stirred by the whistles of the bosun's mates. He and his fellow midshipmen quickly slipped out of their hammocks and climbed the companionways to their posts. The Commander-in-Chief was already on the quarterdeck. Beside him Captain Hardy had taken up his station attended by Signal Lieutenant John Pasco.

Beyond the bow of the *Victory*, ten miles to the east and silhouetted against the morning sun, the ships of the Combined Fleet stretched across the horizon. After two years of pursuit under Nelson's command across thousands of miles of ocean, Pollard was finally able to see the enemy.

By 11.00 am the ensigns and tricolors of the Combined Fleet were just a few miles distant and Captain Hardy decided it was time for his men to go to their battle stations. The drum roll of the marines at the hatchways reverberated around the heart of the ship, summoning the whole crew. The ship, having been cleared for battle two days earlier, was quickly primed for action.

At 11.48 am John Pollard supervised the hoisting of the flags for the most famous signal in British naval history: *'ENGLAND EXPECTS THAT EVERY MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY'*.

From his vantage point on the poop deck he surveyed the spectacle. Positioned in trail behind *Victory*, eleven warships stretched into the distance. One mile to the south Admiral Collingwood's *Royal Sovereign* was being tracked by a string of fourteen ships in close order. Forward of the two columns, almost motionless, the curved line of the French and Spanish armada waited, their 1,300 port broadside cannons exposed, glinting in the midday sun and directed at the slowly advancing British fleet.

The *Royal Sovereign* was the first to come under bombardment at about 12.05 pm. At 12.25 pm the *Victory* received fire, the first shots falling wide, but then seven or eight of the enemy were directing broadsides at the British flagship. Pollard heard the whistle of incoming fire as the shots passed overhead and tore into her sails.

The next salvo ran across her decks and smashed the wheel to pieces. A double-headed shot struck a party of marines drawn up beside Pollard on the poop deck and killed eight of them. Twelve other crewmembers died and thirty were wounded before her guns could fire a single shot.

John Pollard provided the following account of that first strike:

*'I was stationed on the poop in the action and was the first officer there struck by a splinter on the right arm occasioned by a cannon shot, when the spy glass I held dropped on the deck. Capt'n Pasco, who was then the Signal Lieut., standing next to me, observed it and asked if I was wounded – being stunned at the time from the contusion I felt my arm and found the bone not broken, I answered "No Sir". I then took up the glass. Some short time afterwards a musket ball passed through the shell of the same glass about a foot above my hand. I also had my watch shattered by another musket ball which passed in an oblique direction. It was a hunting watch: the glass was broken inside which slightly scarred the skin....'*

At 12.41 pm the *Victory* broke through between Villeneuve's flagship *Bucentaure* and the *Redoubtable*. At point blank range she fired her whole port broadside through the stern of the *Bucentaure*, killing or wounding hundreds of her crew. She then fell alongside the *Redoubtable*, releasing at close range a series of devastating starboard broadsides.

The *Redoubtable* was severely damaged and hundreds of men were massacred on her gun decks, but the French captain was determined to fight on and ordered his men to board the *Victory*. In the ensuing skirmish 40 British officers and men were killed or wounded, but all attempts to board were repulsed. Meanwhile others of the French crew trained in small arms marksmanship were sent aloft with grenades and muskets. Their blitz from the tops began to inflict appalling casualties on the gun-crews and marines on of the *Victory*.

As the battle raged, Nelson walked the quarterdeck. Conspicuous in his admiral's uniform, he was an easy target for the French sharpshooters and at 1.15 pm he was shot. In great pain he was carried down to the surgeon on the orlop deck.

Pollard witnessed the fall of his Commander-in-Chief but remained at his station scanning the battle scene through the blinding smoke and confusion. Then Lieutenant Pasco was badly wounded and taken below. At this moment of chaos Pollard grabbed a marine's musket and began to fire at the French marksmen. The series of events that followed are best portrayed in Pollard's own words: *'... I observed the officers and men falling very fast, both on the poop and quarterdeck, when my attention was arrested by seeing in the tops of the Redoubtable a number of soldiers in a crouching position loading and directing their destructive fire on the poop and quarterdeck of Victory. The Signal Quarter-Master called King was standing by me at the time. I pointed them out to him, and there being a number of spare muskets on the Signal Chest for the use of the marines, I took up one – King supplying me with the Ball cartridges from 2 barrels kept on the after part of the poop for the use of the marines. Captain Adair of the Marines and the small party he had left (the others being killed or wounded) was firing from the starboard gangway of the Victory into the Redoubtable's deck when Captain Adair was killed. The two Lieutenants of Marines were previously wounded by musket balls. As often as I saw the French soldiers rise breast high in the Tops to fire on the Victory's deck, I continued firing, until there was not one to be seen. King, the Quartermaster, in the act of giving me the last parcel of Ball cartridges, was shot through the forehead and fell dead before me; this event gave my feelings a great shock. I was the only officer left alive on the poop after the action ceased (that was stationed there), the others being either killed or wounded. Thus originated the belief that I was the Person who shot the Man that killed Lord Nelson.'*

By 2.30 pm the firepower proved too much for the *Bucentaure* and *Redoubtable* to endure and both ships hauled down their colours. The British ships continued pursuing and firing on the remainder of the enemy until 4.30 pm when the signal was given for them to return to the flagship. At the same time, after receiving news of his famous victory, Nelson died of his wounds.

When the battle subsided Pollard was still on the poop deck:

*'I remained there till some time after the action was concluded, assisting in rigging the jury mast; then I was ushered into the ward-room, where Sir Thomas Hardy and other officers were assembled, and complimented by them as the person who avenged Lord Nelson's death ....'*

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John Pollard was promoted to lieutenant in November 1806 and continued to serve at sea until 1814 when a debilitating illness caused him to remain ashore for the rest of his career. He married a local girl Matilda Trevethan in 1822 and they had six children. Pollard served at Chatham and with the Coast Guard in Ireland, receiving the Trafalgar Medal in 1848. He was appointed to the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich in 1853 where he retired as a Commander in 1864 having completed 66 years naval service. He died at Greenwich in 1868.

There is overwhelming evidence to support the historic contention that John Pollard was the 'Avenger of Nelson' at Trafalgar. Furthermore it is without doubt that he was one of the very few in authority on the *Victory* who, from his elevated and 'privileged' position on the poop deck, witnessed and survived the whole day's momentous events.

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Details of the book can also be found on: <http://ramehistorygroup.org.uk/publications.html>

This article was kindly donated by Jack Spence - a founding member of the Rame History Group.