



From: The Editor, The Forces Postal History Society Newsletter

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9 Oct 06

D Keith Jones Esq

Dear Mr Jones,

Reproduction of Nick Colley's article on Trafalgar

Thank you for your letter of 3 Oct requesting permission to reproduce this article from No 265. I have discussed with Nick and neither he nor the FPHS have any objection provided the origin is acknowledged and the article is reproduced in full. Should you wish to amend or abridge the article please let me see the amended version prior to publication so I can check that Nick is happy with it.

I don't know how you publish your material but I could let you have electronic copy in either WORD or Acrobat format on a CD if that would help – just give me a ring.

With best wishes

Colin Tabcart

A Letter From A Participant At Trafalgar

Nick Colley

This article describes a letter from a crew member of HMS *Bellerophon* at the Battle of Trafalgar to his brother, in which he describes the battle as he saw it. Also, and, perhaps more interestingly since it is so little documented, he gives a detailed account of what happened to him afterwards, when he was sent on board a dismasted Spanish battleship as a member of the prize crew.

The writer is Hugh Entwistle: he is listed on the Trafalgar Role as an Able Seaman, but the quality of the handwriting, and his obvious literacy, indicates abilities and intelligence well above what we might perceive as the average for the lower deck at the time of the Napoleonic War.¹ Indeed, fortuitous use of Google and the Internet has unearthed the presence of a Hugh Entwistle in 1851 settled at Marlbro Grange, Llanbleddian, in the County of Glamorgan. Aged 65 (that would mean he was 19 in 1805), his occupation(s) are listed as magistrate, retired **naval commander** (my emphasis) and farmer. He was born in Leeds (which tallies with other information on the Hugh Entwistle at Trafalgar), and his wife was born in Lancashire – one might irreverently speculate about more Wars of the Roses ...

According to O'Byrne's *Naval Biography*², his naval career began on May 7th 1799 when he entered the Navy as a Volunteer, First Class, on board the *Amethyst*, 38, Captain John Cooke – the same individual who fell at Trafalgar as captain of the *Bellerophon*, as we shall see. While a Midshipman in this ship, he assisted at the capture of three French privateers, and, on January 27th and April 9th, 1801, the surrender of the French frigate *La Dedaigieuse*, 36, and corvette *Le General Brune*, 14. He served briefly as Acting Lieutenant on board the *Cruizer*, 18, in the summer of 1805 before joining Captain Cooke aboard the *Bellerophon*. As an aside, his rating as Acting Lieutenant aboard the *Cruizer* seems to conflict with his rating as Able Seaman on the Trafalgar Role. He obtained a firm commission as Lieutenant on January 28th 1806, and his naval career in the 10 years remaining of the Napoleonic War from is of some interest – if his correspondence from this period still exists and can be discovered, the letters would potentially be fine additions to any collection. He served in the *Paulina*, 16, from 1806-1812, and was present at Lord Gambier's expedition to Copenhagen. He subsequently served in the *Warspite*, 74, Captain Blackwood, Channel Fleet, 1812-1814, the *Bucephalus*, troop ship, 1814-1815, and the *Seahorse* and *Madagascar*, both 38-gun frigates, in 1815. He was placed on half pay on August 20th, 1816.

The text is as follows. The only changes I have made are to the punctuation – he seemed too fond of commas, and allergic to full stops – and to one or two inappropriate capital letters. The phrasing and spelling are unchanged.

Bellerophon, December 14th, 1805

Dear Brother,

I will give you an account of the *Bellerophon*'s proceedings in the action. The *Monarca* was the ship intended for us to engage. We bore down under her stern, raked her, and hauled up under her lee, which station we had not been in five minutes when *L'Aigle* came to her assistance, and attempted to board us, but they were soon repulsed. About twenty minutes afterwards, the *St. John* (*sic*) shot up on our larboard quarter and commenced a heavy fire. At this time we had three ships on us: the *Monarca*, *St. John*, and *L'Aigle*. Our men fell very fast: our gallant Captain, Master, boatswain, and one midshipman fell fighting with pistols in their hands, and several of our men. The *Dreadnought*, seeing with what a superior force we were engaged came to our assistance, and soon silenced the *St. John*. A few minutes afterwards, the *Monarca*

¹ First Class Volunteers, aspirants for officer rank, were borne on ships' books as Able Seamen for accountancy purposes.

² O'Byrne, William R: *A Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 1849. Biographies of all Naval Officers in the 1845 Navy List

struck to us, and we were in hopes of soon making *L'Aigle* do the same, but unfortunately she got clear of us, after having rubbed against our guns for one hour and twenty minutes. In attempting to make her escape, she fell on board the *Defiance*, and was soon taken. The *Babama* being the next ship to us, we gave her a few broadsides, when she struck, having been a good deal cut up before. The last ships we fired at were the four that were afterwards taken by Sir Richard Strachan.³

As soon as the action was over, I was sent on board the *Babama* with a Lieut. and 30 men to take possession of her. It coming on dark so soon, none of the prisoners were taken out of her, and in the morning, the *Orion* took us in tow, and staid with us till Wednesday night, when it came to blow so hard that it was impossible for us to keep her afloat. We made a signal of distress to the *Orion*, but there being so heavy a sea running, it was impossible for her to send any boat to our assistance. We had at eleven o'clock on Wednesday night nine feet of water in the hold, no pumps, no masts, no rudder, and five hundred Spaniards on board. We had only one English carpenter on board, and a little before twelve o'clock he came on deck and told me the ship could not swim ten minutes longer, but thank God the wind died away just at that time, and we kept her afloat till the morning, when we delivered the ship up to the Spaniards on condition that they should run the ship up on shore in the best place to save our lives, there being no English ship in sight. That afternoon there being less wind, we advised the Spaniards to anchor, which we did, as we knew that some English ship would be down very soon to look for us, or if it came to blow again we could very easily run the ship on shore before she would sink, being only four miles from the land. We remained at anchor till the Sunday following, when an English cutter came to our assistance. All the English men on board with the Lieut. and me lowered ourselves down from the driver boom, and into the cutter's boat, their being such a sea the boat could not come alongside. We all got on board the cutter safe, and were sent to Gibraltar. When we got there, to my great mortification, I was informed the *Bellerophon* had sailed that very day for England. I immediately went on board the *Conqueror* for a passage to England, where I arrived on the 1st of this month, and the next day had the pleasure of joining the *Bellerophon*.

I remain your ever affectionate brother, Hugh Entwistle.

Bellerophon December 14. 1805
 the Conqueror for a passage to England where I arrived
 on the 1st of this month, and the next day had the
 pleasure of joining the Bellerophon. I remain your ever
 affectionate Brother Hugh Entwistle
 I will give you an account of the Bellerophon
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Fig 1 - Opening few lines of the letter

³ Known as Strachan's Action, fought on 4 Nov 1805. Sir Richard Strachan, with 4 British battleships, captured all four French battleships under Rear Admiral Dumanoir, a significant addition to the triumph of Trafalgar.

Commentary

The books by John Terraine and David Howarth on the subject of the Battle of Trafalgar give detailed accounts of the movement and actions of the *Bellerophon*: she seems to have played a significant role. The diagram in figure 2 shows the disposition of each vessel in their respective fleets on the morning of October 21st 1805, as the British bore down on the combined fleets of the Spanish and French. The ships mentioned in the text are enclosed by boxes. The *Bellerophon* is 6th ship in the column led by Admiral Collingwood in HMS *Royal Sovereign*.

Both Terraine and Howarth confirm the statement in the letter that the *Bellerophon* passed astern of the *Monarca*, Terraine quoting the time as about 1pm. However, the causes of the meeting with *L'Aigle* are described rather differently by Howarth, who seems to have quoted from the ship's log, (which, incidentally, is quoted verbatim by Terraine): ".....(*Bellerophon*) hauled to the wind to fire (into *Monarca*) again, but over the smoke, she saw the top-gallant sails of another ship close on her starboard bow. She hauled all aback to check her way and avoid a collision, but she rammed the other ship and locked her foreyard into the other's mainyard. She was the French *L'Aigle*....." – hardly the same as "... *L'Aigle* came to her (*Monarca*'s) assistance..." The deaths of the Master, Mr. Overton, and Captain Cooke, are described in Howarth's book: the Master had a leg shattered – presumably by a cannon ball, and Captain Cooke was shot in the chest by a musket ball. This left the First Lieutenant, Mr. Cumby, in command. Howarth's text describes how *L'Aigle* and *Bellerophon* were so close that the (starboard) gun crews fought hand-to-hand through the open gun ports. The *Bellerophon* perhaps had more than her fair share of luck when a hand grenade thrown from *L'Aigle* blew open the door to her magazine: however, there were two doors with a passage between, and the act of blowing one open blew the second shut, otherwise both vessels would have been demolished in the consequent explosion. (If only the same construction principle had been applied to the ammunition hoists in HMS *Hood* before she encountered the *Bismark*, and Beatty's battle cruisers at Jutland ...) However, on the upper deck, small arms fire had almost cleared the *Bellerophon*'s poop, quarterdeck and fo'c's'le of men. It appeared that *L'Aigle* might try to board. Lt. Cumby mustered what men he could in anticipation of repelling such a manoeuvre, which they did by small arms fire, and when five Frenchmen climbed on to the spritsail yardarm, and started crawling towards the bowsprit, a *Bellerophon* had the presence of mind to let go the spritsail brace which supported the end of the yard: it tilted under their weight, and they all fell into the sea: a touch of slapstick in the middle of the battle. As the fighting raged, the superiority of the British gunnery eventually began to tell, and *L'Aigle* finally shut her lower deck gun ports. This left *Bellerophon*'s gunners free from attack: they elevated their cannon and fired upwards through the enemy's decks. *L'Aigle* made sail and drew clear, but not before she had felled *Bellerophon*'s main topmast. Interestingly, Hugh Entwistle reports the duration of the engagement with *L'Aigle* as an hour and twenty minutes. The *Bellerophon*'s log records the duration of the encounter as one hour and five minutes. Given the natural uncertainty in the heat of battle, and/or possibly the haziness of memory, these two figures are fairly close. Meanwhile, the port batteries had been pounding the *Monarca* into submission, and she struck her colours at 3 p.m., according to *Bellerophon*'s log, 2 ½ hours after *Bellerophon* had opened fire on her. Lt. Cumby sent a boat with a party of men to take possession of her. While *Bellerophon* was battling with *L'Aigle* and *Monarca*, she was also exchanging fire with the Spanish battleship *Bahama*, and receiving fire from another Spanish two-decker, the *San Juan Nepomuceno*, and a French two-decker, *la Swiftsure*. Considering the ferocity of the action around *Bellerophon*, it is hardly surprising her casualties were heavy, 27 killed, and 123 wounded. These were the third heaviest in the British fleet, after *Colossus* (40 and 160), and *Victory*, 57 and 102. The *San Juan Nepomuceno* is presumably the '*St John*' mentioned in Hugh Entwistle's text, and it is recorded that it was indeed the *Dreadnought* that took her as a prize. Speaking of prizes, Terraine states that the *Bahama* was taken by the *Colossus* while Hugh Entwistle, (and O'Byrne) report that the *Bahama* struck to *Bellerophon*.

The remark "The last ships we fired at were the four that were afterwards taken by Sir Richard Strachan." refers to the vessels in the van of the allied fleet, commanded by Admiral Dumanoir in *Formidable*. It took Dumanoir two hours to reverse course and another hour after

that before his ships were engaged, initially by the vessels towards the rear of Nelson's column, *Ajax* and *Agamemnon*, and a little later by the last two ships, *Minotaur* and *Spartiate*, who did not come into the action until after 3 p.m. (the *Victory* had opened fire shortly after noon). These were, as well as the *Formidable*, the *Scipion*, the *Duguay Trouin*, and the *Mont Blanc*. The *Neptuno* was taken by the *Minotaur*. The other four vessels made their escape, and tried to reach Rochefort, but encountered a division of the Western Squadron of the Channel Fleet, under the command of Rear Admiral Sir Richard Strachan on November 3rd. The fight lasted two and a quarter hours, and all four French ships were captured.

Finally: the 'Wednesday night' he refers to is October 23rd, two days after the battle. From the narrative of the letter, it seems that the ship to which Entwistle had been sent as one of the prize crew was abandoned (on what sounds to be a lee shore) and left to the Spanish. One might assume that the chances of the vessel surviving were therefore rather slim. This might be hard to reconcile with the record that he'd been sent to the *Bahama* – which is recorded as having been taken into the Royal Navy, and therefore must have survived. The *Monarca*, however, is recorded as having been wrecked. Was it, therefore, this ship to which Entwistle was sent? History records that *Bellerophon* did indeed send a party to her (see above).

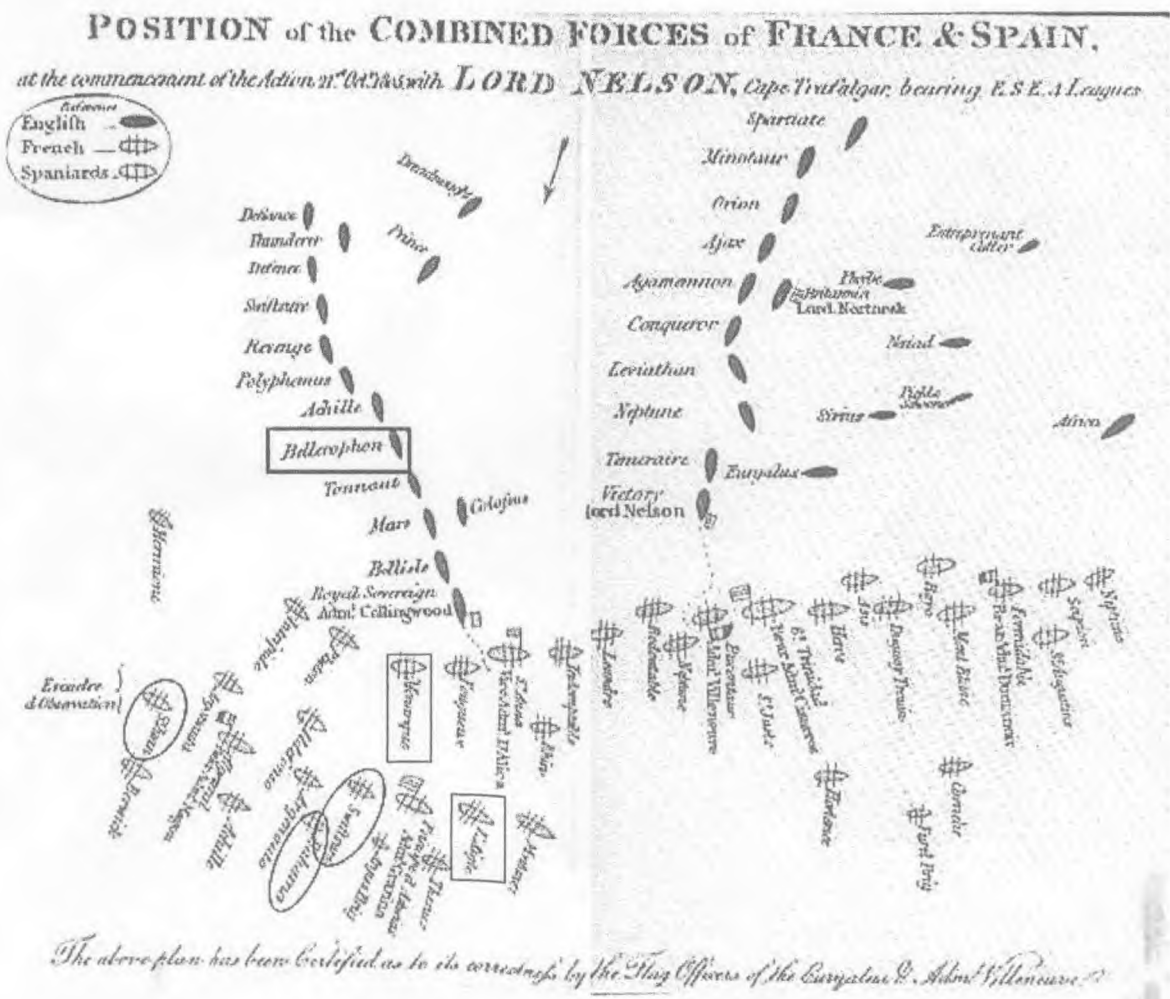


Figure 2. Ship positions at the commencement of the battle.

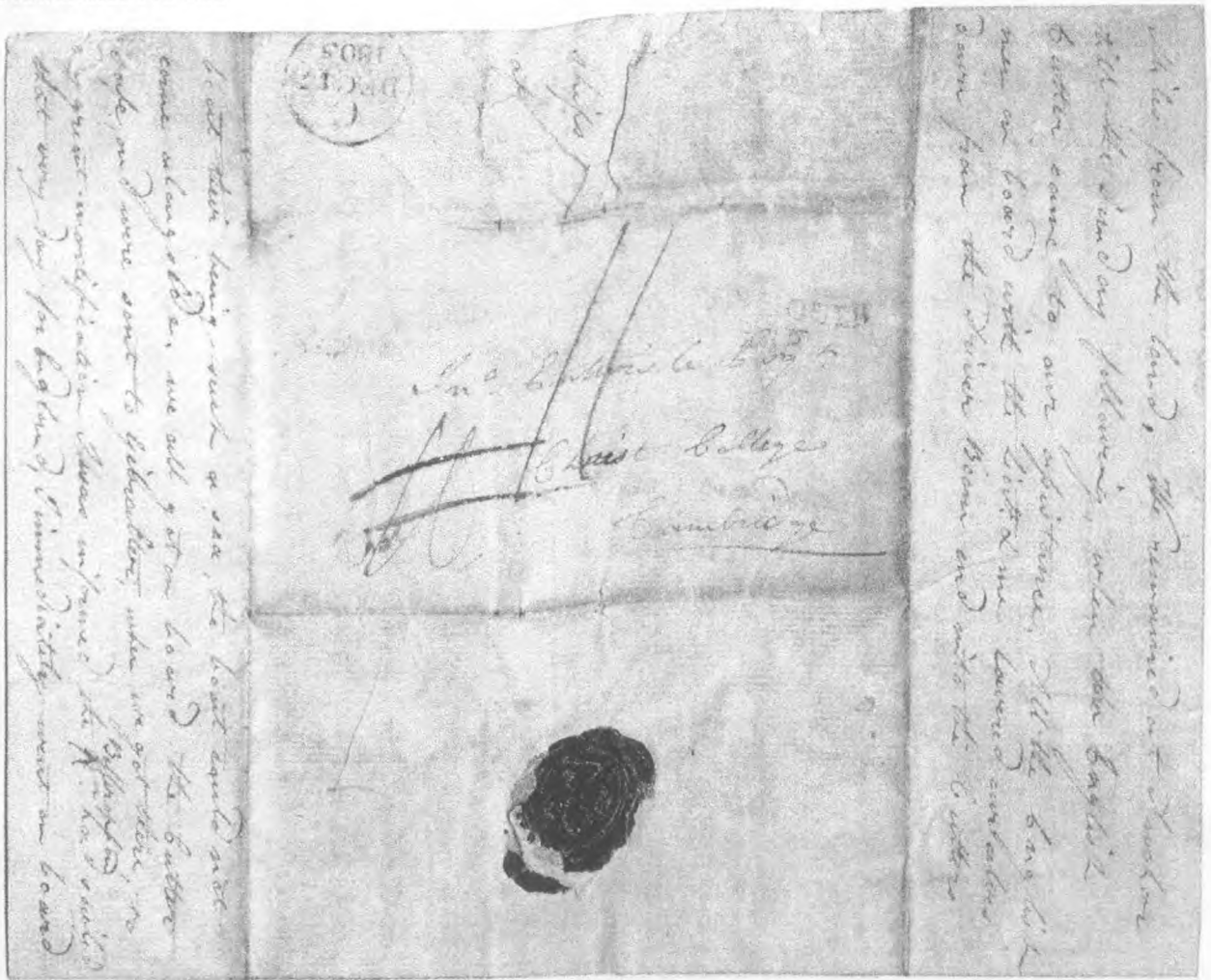


Figure 3. Address Panel etc.

The item bears a poorly struck Plymouth 218 mileage mark, and a London circular transit date stamp. It was initially rated at 10d, for 218 miles Plymouth to London. London added on the mileage to Cambridge and amended the total sum due from the recipient to 11d.

Fig 4. HMS *Bellerophon*



References:

- Howarth, D., *Trafalgar: The Nelson Touch*. World Books, 1970
- Pivka, Otto von: *Navies of the Napoleonic Era*. David & Charles, 1980, ISBN 0-7153-7767-1
- Terraine, J., *Trafalgar*. Sidgwick and Jackson, 1976, ISBN 0283 98236 5
- Cordingly, David: *Billy Ruffian – The Bellerophon and the Downfall of Napoleon*. Bloomsbury 2003, ISBN 0-7475-6537-6