

A gift to cherish.

During the early months of 1798 the Royal Navy and the Navy of the French Republic engaged in a protracted game of “hide and seek” as Bonaparte’s fleet crossed the Mediterranean pursued by Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson who had been sent from the Tagus fleet with express instructions to find, and defeat, the French expedition.

For more than two months Nelson pursued his quarry – on several occasions only missing them by a few hours. Bonaparte was well aware of the pursuit and such was the secrecy of his movements that he was able to attack and capture Malta and then land in Egypt without disruption.

Having disembarked the Army, Admiral Brueys d’Aigalliers anchored his fleet in ABOUKIR BAY, some 20 miles northeast of Alexandria, confident that he had established an impregnable defensive position.

On August 1st. 1798 as the Royal Naval fleet sailed past Aboukir Bay the masthead lookout on *HMS Zealous* spotted several masts and reported them to his superiors. Nelson did a swift “u turn” and, closing the approaches to the Bay, he saw the enemy, at anchor in battle formation. The fleets were almost evenly matched with NELSON’s comprising 13 ships off the line, 1 fourth rate and one sloop and the French 13 ships of the line and 4 frigates.

Nelson did not delay and he ordered an immediate attack, splitting into two divisions with one passing between the anchored vessels and the shore and the other engaging the seaward vessels of the enemy. Subjected to such intense cross-fire, the French warships were battered into surrender in a three hour encounter but before they did so the French flagship “L’Orient” exploded in a huge fireball- and Admiral Brueys killed. Of the total of 17 ships only two ships of the line and two frigates managed to escape – an action that saw the end of the French dominance in the region and entrenched the Royal Navy in a dominant position until the end of the war. With Bonaparte’s army trapped in Egypt the ramifications of Nelson’s victory were felt across Europe.

Nelson was rewarded by being appointed “Baron Nelson”. He had been wounded during the engagement and it was said that he was far from satisfied with this paltry award.

With relative tranquility restored, one of Nelson’s Captains (Benjamin Hallowell) decided to have a closer look at the semi-submerged “L’Orient” and he salvaged her mainmast taking it back to his command “Swiftsure”. Almost immediately, he instructed his carpenters and shipwrights to make a teak coffin and once this was done, Hallowell decided to send it to his Admiral.

Happily - and probably fortunately for Hallowell – he also wrote a letter to accompany his gift. “My Lord, herewith I send you a coffin made from L’Orient’s mainmast, that when you are tired of this life, you may be buried in one of your own trophies. But that that period may be far distant is the sincere wish of your obedient and much-obliged servant, Ben Hallowell”

Nelson accepted the gift and carried it in his cabin, until 1805 when he sent it ashore for storage saying “ this will be needed upon my return”.

Nelson died at Trafalgar On October 21st. 1805 – a few months after landing the coffin ashore and on January 9th. 1806 the coffin bore his remains into St.Paul’ Cathedral prior to his burial.

It was said that His Majesty George III objected strongly to the Cathedral being used for the funeral as, in his opinion, NELSON’s liaison with Emma Hamilton ruled out such a public funeral. – but eventually public opinion prevailed.

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For some reason I couldn’t find a photo of Nelson’s coffin (teak or pine?) online but I did determine that it had been enclosed in a soldered lead one and then in an ornately decorated mahogany casket for the funeral processions, the first by water and the following day by land, this final procession taking three and a half hours to pass. The twelve strong team from Victory’s crew would have found the triple coffin very heavy and impossible to carry downstairs to the crypt below. A hole had been cut in the floor and the coffin(s) lowered through it to the granite sarcophagus below. Ten years later this was replaced with the then near 300 year old sarcophagus that had been prepared for Cardinal Wolsey before he fell from favour with Henry VIII.
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