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Horatio Nelson

Nelson was born on 29 September 1758 at Burnham Thorpe, Norfolk. At the age of 12 Nelson joined HMS *Raisonable*, as Midshipman. Within a few years he had served in an Arctic expedition and spent almost three years on the East Indies station. Shortly after he returned to England, he was made acting Sub Lieutenant in HMS *Worcester* on 26 September 1776 and then, not long after, Lieutenant of HMS *Lowestoft* on 10 April 1777. Nelson then undertook active service in North America during the War of American Independence (1775-82). It was during this period that Nelson was promoted Commander and appointed to the brig HMS *Badger*; thus by the age of twenty, he became a Post-Captain with an immediate opportunity to distinguish himself on active service. On 11 June 1779 he was appointed Captain of HMS *Hitchingbroke*. Spain had joined the French in support of the American colonists and Nelson was sent to Nicaragua as the senior officer in command of a joint expedition to attack the Spanish fort at San Juan. The fort was captured largely due to the initiative and leadership of Nelson. At the end of this action, Nelson was struck down with a fever and had to return to England to recover. Once recovered, he sailed for the North American Station in command of HMS *Albermarle* in which he remained until the end of the war.

In 1784, he undertook his only peacetime commission as a Captain. He was posted to the West Indies in HMS *Boreas*, to suppress the illicit trade between the West Indies and the former American colonists. It was here that he met the widowed Frances Nesbit and married her in 1787. He returned home a few months later but went on half pay due to peacetime reductions in the navy. He remained inactive for five years, living mainly in Norfolk with his wife and stepson, Josiah.

In 1793, with the outbreak of the French Revolutionary wars, Nelson was given command of HMS *Agamemnon* and appointed to Lord Hood's fleet serving in the Mediterranean. He undertook service inshore and on blockade duties, mainly off the coast of Italy. He gave assistance to the army to secure Corsica from the French. During the successful siege of Calvi between June and August 1794, Nelson was blinded in the right eye from enemy shot.

In 1795 Nelson distinguished himself in actions against the French fleet and was promoted to Commodore, joining the larger HMS *Captain*. On the 14 February 1797, Nelson played a prominent role in the battle of Cape St. Vincent, under Sir John Jervis. The British fleet fought a larger but operationally inferior Spanish fleet. During the battle, Nelson took his ship out of the line of battle to attack a group of Spanish ships. Four were taken as prizes. Nelson led a boarding party that captured two ships, the *San Nicholas* and *San Josef*, and personally received the surrender of a number of Spanish officers. Six days after the battle he was promoted Rear Admiral of the Blue. Additionally, he was also awarded the Knight Commander of the Bath for his courage and skill in battle and given the honorary rank of Colonel of Marines.

In July 1797, he led an unsuccessful expedition to capture a Spanish treasure ship at Santa Cruz in Tenerife. Nelson was seriously wounded in his right arm and it had to be amputated. Nelson was invalided at home until April 1798. On his recovery, he re-joined Jervis's fleet off the Portuguese coast on board HMS *Vanguard* and was given command of a detached squadron. They were to search for and destroy the French fleet, known to be about to sail

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from Mediterranean ports for an unknown destination. The camaraderie of the individual captains of this squadron led to them collectively being known as Nelson's 'band of brothers'.

During these operations on the way to Toulon, *Vanguard* was dismantled in a severe gale off Sardinia. It took four days for the ship to be refitted. By the time Nelson reached Toulon, the French fleet had sailed. He sailed down the west coast of Italy in pursuit of news of the French fleet but found none. With the fall of Malta, he was convinced that the French destination was Egypt and sailed his fleet to the eastern Mediterranean. Unknowingly, during the passage, they passed the French during the night. Nelson's fleet returned to the area after replenishing and discovered the French fleet at Aboukir Bay on the Nile. During the night of 1 August 1798, the French were totally destroyed during the battle of the Nile, foiling Napoleon's plans to cut off Britain's Mediterranean trade routes but also cutting off the French army in Egypt. Only four of the French ships survived the onslaught.

The British fleet withdrew to Naples where Nelson was welcomed as a hero. He was given hospitality by the British Minister, Sir William Hamilton and his wife, Emma. Honours were heaped on Nelson; he was created a Baron and promoted to Rear Admiral of the Red. Whilst in Italy, Nelson became involved in the affairs of Naples, encouraging King Ferdinand to act against the French. This advice was disastrous. The King was driven from the mainland of Italy and took refuge in Sicily under Nelson's protection. It was here that the romantic liaison between Nelson and Emma Hamilton began. During this period Nelson was instrumental in the hanging of the republican Commodore Francesco Caracciolo, who had been captured at the surrender of the Neapolitan republican forces.

Shortly after, Nelson was recalled to Britain at the same time as Sir William. As he was unable to return home in his flagship, HMS *Foudroyant*, along with the Hamiltons, they made the journey overland through Europe, arriving back in Britain in November 1800 at Great Yarmouth. In January 1801, he was further promoted to Vice Admiral of the Blue and appointed as second in command to Admiral Parker for an expedition to the Baltic against a coalition of northern powers led by Tsar Paul I of Russia. On 2 April 1801, against Admiral Parker's instruction, Nelson led a squadron to attack the Danish fleet at the Battle of Copenhagen and arranged the terms of the resultant armistice with Denmark. Admiral Parker was recalled to Britain and Nelson became Commander-in-Chief and elevated to Viscount in May 1801. With the northern coalition ended, there was no further need for Nelson's services in the Baltic and he returned to England.

On 24 July 1801, he was appointed to Commander-in-Chief of the inshore forces designed to protect the country from invasion. On 16 May 1803 Nelson was appointed to the command of the Mediterranean Fleet with HMS *Victory* as his flagship. For the next two years, his duty was to keep a permanent blockade on Toulon to prevent the French squadron escaping to join forces with the rest of the Franco-Spanish fleet. In April 1805, Admiral Villeneuve escaped Toulon and was ordered by Napoleon to the West Indies to take command of a combined Franco-Spanish fleet. The purpose was to secure temporary command of the English Channel that would enable the French army to cross for an assault on Britain.

Nelson was in England when he learnt of the Franco-Spanish fleet's arrival at Cadiz. He received orders to return to the Mediterranean and arrived off Cadiz at the end of September 1805. He immediately began to plan for the



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inevitable battle. On 21 October 1805, off Cape Trafalgar, the French-Spanish fleet of thirty three ships came out of Cadiz and were met in battle by Nelson's numerically inferior fleet of twenty-seven ships. Nelson won a decisive victory but was fatally injured during the battle by a French sniper shot. He died later that day at the age of forty-seven. He was buried at St. Paul's Cathedral on the 9 January 1806.