

Report on the reason for the surrendering of the French ship *Le Redoubtable*.

'*Precis Verbal*' of the famous action of the *Le Redoubtable* commanded by *Capitaine de vaisseau*, Jean Jacques Étienne Lucas: committed to parchment 23rd October 1805.

"This day, October 23rd, we, the undersigned, *Capitaine de vaisseau* and officer of the Legion of Honour, having the command of His Majesty's Ship *Le Redoubtable*, together with the officers of the staff, under officers Etc, finding ourselves united on board the English ship *Swiftsure*, and having survived the loss of our own vessel, have drawn up the following report containing the reasons and circumstances which occasioned the loss of the *Le Redoubtable*":-

"On the 21st October, at half past 10 A.M., the combined squadron found itself to windward of the enemy, forming in line of battle, when *Le Redoubtable*, according to the order of seniority, being the third ship to the rear of the Admiral's ship, the *Bucentaure*, the two headmost ships, in consequence of a breeze springing up, after having begun to manoeuvre, left the Admiral's ship exposed just at the moment when the enemy had made his disposition for attacking our centre. The *Victory*, of 110 guns, under Admiral Nelson and the *Temeraire* of the same rate were at the head of the division which bore down on the Admiral's to surround it. Captain Lucas very soon perceiving the enemy's design, immediately maneuvered for the purpose of falling into the rear of the *Bucentaure*, in which he happily succeeded; and though the Admiral called to us several times to make sail, we had all unanimously determined rather to lose our own ship than witness the capture of our Admiral. At a quarter before twelve the firing commenced on both sides between the shipping that were within gunshot. The enemy's two three-deckers directed all their efforts to the forcing of our line in the rear of *Bucentaure* and to force the *Le Redoubtable* on board her in order to make the Admiral's ship cease her firing; but not being able to move us, we were ordered to lay ourselves alongside the Admiral and in that situation gave and received a number of broadsides, but which however, did not prevent us from lashing ourselves to the *Victory*. Our Commandant then giving orders to board, our brave crew with their officers at their head, intently putting themselves in motion. The conflict was immediately begun with small arms and upwards of two hundred grenades were thrown onto *Victory's* deck. Admiral Nelson fought at the head of his crew, but still, as our fire was much more vigorous than that of the English, we silenced them in about a quarter of an hour. The deck of the *Victory* was covered with the dead; and Admiral Nelson killed. Still it was difficult to board the *Victory* its upper deck being so much higher than that of the *Le Redoubtable's*; however the Ensign Yon and four seamen, climbing up by the anchors, succeeded and would have been followed by the rest of their brave comrades on the larboard side, but the English ship, the *Temeraire*, perceiving that the fire on the Admiral's ship had ceased, immediately fell upon our starboard side, and after raking us with heavy fire, the slaughter which ensued was not to be described; more than two hundred of our men being killed, the Captain ordered the remainder to board the *Temeraire* which was only prevented by the arrival of another the enemy's ships within pistol shot of us in which station it remained until we had struck our colours, and which took place about half past three P.M., for the following reasons":-

"Because, out of the crew of six hundred and fifty three men, five hundred and twenty two men were no longer in a situation to continue the conflict, three hundred being killed and two hundred and twenty two badly wounded. Among the latter were the whole of the staff, and ten inferior officers.

Because the main and the mizzen masts were gone by the board, the first fell on the *Temeraire*, and some of the yards of that ship fell on the *Le Redoubtable*.

Because the bowsprit and part of the rudder were shot away, and several of the guns dismantled, and in consequence of the bursting of an eighteen pounder on the second deck and a carronade of thirty-six pounds in the stern.

Because almost all the ports were knocked-in and the decks entirely bored through by the upper deck guns of the **Victory** and the **Temeraire**.

Because both sides of the ship were shot through in such a manner that members of the wounded were killed by the enemy after they had been removed from their quarters.

Because part of the ship was on fire and had a number of leaks, so that notwithstanding all the pumps were set agoing, she must have sunk.

Throughout the whole of the fight, the **Victory** and the **Temeraire** never ceased their attack upon **Le Redoubtable**, nor did we separate from each other for some time after the battle had ceased between the rest of the fleets.

The **Victory** lost its mizzen mast; its rigging was nearly cut to pieces, and a great part of the crew was disabled. Admiral Nelson was killed by a musket-shot during the attempt to board. At seven in the evening, the **Swiftsure** took us in tow and in the morning sent a party onboard to take charge of Captain Lucas, Lieutenant Dupotet (first officer) and M. Duchrest. About noon the leaks had increased so much, that the prize-master sending for assistance, the **Swiftsure** sent its boats to save the remainder of our crew, but had scarcely had the time to remove one hundred and nineteen French men.

About seven in the evening, the whole of the stern being underwater, the vessel sunk with all the wounded men still onboard.

On the 23rd, the Captain of **Swiftsure** seeing some people at a distance upon a wreck, caused them to be brought in to the number of fifty; but including seventy of the wounded that were taken up, not more than one hundred and sixty nine were saved out of four hundred and sixty three.

Written on board the **Swiftsure**, signed by the officers of the quarterdeck and countersigned by *Capitaine de vaisseau* Lucas.

My comments:-

- a. In addition to the Le Redoubtable sinking, the French flagship Bucentaure also sank in very heavy seas whilst escaping back to the nearest Spanish port Cadiz. Both the Admiral (Villeneuve) and Captain Lucas were taken to England as prisoners of war, along with many other French and Spanish officers and sailors. There were several downsides to the British victory and these chiefly concerned the prizes to be had from these great combined fleets of France and Spain. The sheer ferocity of the battle left a large group of crippled ships (British included), and the huge storms which followed the battle on the 23rd to 26th October, caused the loss of many of them denying prizes and the money the British crews would have received. There were also several escapees both French and Spanish which had bolted from the area. Some were eventually captured intact, specifically the exploits of Admiral Strachan. Some of the less damaged ships were taken as prizes but later and many miles from the battle zone, were recaptured by French and Spanish units who had either escaped uninjured from the battle or had been marshaled for hit and miss raids against the British still licking their wounds. The most treasured prize of course would be the capture and delivery back to England of the French flagship, the Bucentaure. To great rejoicing this was achieved and a large boarding party took control of the seaworthy (though not battle worthy) party. She left the battle scene confident that the people of England were in for a huge treat when the Bucentaure arrived in Portsmouth harbour. It wasn't to be. On the 22nd October the French crew

turned on the British prize-crew and took back command of their precious flagship. We don't know but it must be obvious that the prize-crew were put to the sword. However, on the next day began the foul weather which was to last for several days and during this gale the Bucentaure was forced onto the shore, east of Faro whilst heading for the nearest friendly port, Cadiz, and was totally lost. The crew were rescued by the French ship Indomptable and continued their journey to Cadiz. As soon as the storm which forced Bucentaure on the rocks abated so too did a new and more aggressive storm appear, and this time it was the turn of the Indomptable to be wrecked at the head of Cadiz Bay. Of the 1200 souls onboard not above 100 were saved. In effect, the French flagship and all who sailed in her (with the exception of the French admiral and a handful of crew members now POW's heading for England) were lost, not directly at the hands of the British, but lost notwithstanding: a victory for Britain however defined.

- b. For those of you with a demanding enquiring mind, there is no better (and possibly the very best) work of reference than the following. It is called the "History of England" dated 1844 (MDCCCXLIV), "The Reign of George III" Volume IV – Book III 1802 to 1920 – Chapter 1 with 1805 starting on page 147 and covers many many pages thereafter covering Trafalgar in the greatest detail. I highly recommend it to you. If you prefer a more casual read still with great professionalism, read Nelson by Tom Pocock (the best at his trade and now sadly deceased) ISBN 0 304 31140 7 1987 published by Cassel Publishers Limited.