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La Revue Maritime is the organ of the Institut Français de la Mer, and may be considered, I suppose, as a combination of the *Naval Review*, the *Mariner's Mirror* and *Lloyd's List*. The French have, most broadmindedly, chosen to mark the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar with a special issue in which some 140 pages out of 190 are devoted to 'the Trafalgar file', and it is this issue which is here reviewed.

There are 14 articles in the Trafalgar dossier, two of which are in English. All those in French are of interest to a naval historian, of whatever nationality, since they represent a viewpoint which is only occasionally represented on this side of the Channel. The primary point which emerges is that, although the French realise that the battle was a disaster, they do not see it as the turning point which ended Napoleon's world ambitions – the very day before Trafalgar, Napoleon had outmanoeuvred the Austrians at Ulm, and forced the surrender of an army, and six weeks later, he defeated a Russo-Austrian army at Austerlitz, which resulted in the Austrians being forced out of the coalition against France, the cession of territory to France, and the end of the Holy Roman Empire. Set against that, Trafalgar was a sideshow – indeed, it is described in one of the articles as "the useless battle". From the French point of view it settled little – by October 1805, Napoleon's strategy had changed, and he no longer had the invasion of Great Britain as a primary aim, nor tactically did it affect his immediate aims in Europe. This view is not universally accepted, as evidenced by another article, by Francis Vallat, whose views are much closer to the British viewpoint; that it was maritime power which was the ultimate cause of Napoleon's downfall.

The first two articles are factual: a history of Villeneuve's flagship, the *Bucentaure*, and an examination of Villeneuve's decisions and actions throughout the campaign. *Bucentaure's* history is short and sour. The name was new, and probably was chosen to commemorate the French defeat and destruction of the Venetian republic in 1797; the Doge's ceremonial barge (also destroyed by the French) was named the *Bucintoro*. *Bucentaure* was a new 80-gun ship, laid down in 1802 at Toulon. During the battle, she was at various times engaged by five British ships, finally surrendering to the *Conqueror*, Captain Israel Pellew. *Bucentaure's* state was pitiable; in the words of her captain: "the rigging shot to pieces, all

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masts gone, down to the deck, having lost all our men on the upper deck, the 24-pounder battery entirely destroyed and all its gun-crews dead or wounded, the port-side guns entangled with the rigging fallen overside, with 450 dead or wounded, being in no state to defend ourselves, surrounded by five enemy vessels and without any hope of support from any other ship... there was no choice.”

Captain Magendie’s report did not exaggerate, save in the casualties, which were bad enough: she had 197 killed and 85 wounded, 32% of her crew that day (she was overmanned, carrying 248 soldiers, to give a total crew of 888, some 65 more than *Victory*). Having surrendered to the *Conqueror*, that ship took her in tow when the battle was over, but was forced to slip the tow in the ensuing storm. The remaining French crew and the prize-crew attempted to save her, but she ran aground close to Cadiz and broke up. Her name has never since been used by a French warship.

The next article is entitled “Trafalgar: Villeneuve, culpable or scapegoat?” Villeneuve received command of the Toulon squadron after the death of Latouche-Tréville in August 1804. Of the competent French admirals, Ganteaume was in command of the Brest squadron; there were three other possibles, Martin, Missiessy and Villeneuve. The latter had the ear of Decrès, the Minister of Marine, who was also fearful that if one of the other two got the job, he might do well, and become a rival for Decrès’ own post. So Villeneuve received the command *faute de mieux* not an auspicious start.

He came of the old nobility, but had placed patriotism before loyalty to his King. At the height of the Terror he was struck off the navy list, but was restored in 1795. He commanded the van at Aboukir, but seeing no possibility of supporting the rest of his fleet, stayed where he was, and managed to slip away with his division the following morning, and reached Malta. Not very glorious perhaps, but in Napoleon’s eyes it had the merit that he had at least saved some of the fleet, and that he had had luck.

Shortly after taking command at Toulon, he issued the only tactical instructions his captains ever received from him. To paraphrase what he wrote “The enemy will not bother with a line of battle parallel to ours, followed by a fire-fight, but will endeavour to surround our rear, to break our line, and fall on the separated ships with superior force”. So Villeneuve had an excellent idea of what Nelson would do. But Villeneuve also stated that he did not intend to seek battle, but wished to avoid encountering the enemy in order to reach his target. Under the circumstances of Napoleon’s master-plan, that should not be held against him.

After he had time to assess his fleet, Villeneuve wrote a report to Decrès which was “more than alarmist” – he described his ships a “short of hands, overloaded with troops, rigging old and of bad quality, whose masts break, and sails shred with the slightest wind, and which have to spend all their time in good weather in repairing damage caused by storm or lack of and inexperience of manpower”. Which may have been true, but it is instructive to make a comparison across the years, and consider Somerville’s signal to his fleet, in the summer of 1942 “Well, well, so this is the Eastern Fleet. There’s many a good tune played on an old fiddle.” Villeneuve ended his report with the statement “The enemy will beat us, even if his force is one-third less than ours”, and asked to be relieved of his command.

But Decrès refused to pass the request on to the Emperor, and persuaded Villeneuve to stay. Thus, says the author of the article, Contre-amiral Rémi Monaque, Decrès must share the responsibility for the French defeat. Monaque goes on to describe the whole campaign as one long martyrdom. Although Villeneuve’s immediate staff were competent and supportive, he was burdened with a ‘political commissar’ in the form of General Lauriston, who reported direct to the Emperor.

In his summing up, Monaque places the blame for Trafalgar on Napoleon, for conceiving a plan which was never going to work, given that English strategy would always ensure that the fleets concentrated at the entrance to the Channel; Decrès for poor judgement

in selecting, and then maintaining Villeneuve in this crucial post; and Villeneuve himself for his negative qualities as a commander; “his fundamental pessimism, his passivity and his fatalism”.

The next article is entitled “What if Trafalgar hadn’t happened, or the myth of the decisive victory”. M. Patrick Villiers contends that it wouldn’t have made any difference in the long run: which is probably true as regards Napoleon. He gives some revealing figures in the course of his article, comparing the relative strength of the navies in 1803 : France, 37 ships of the line, Britain, 189, etc., and also a comparison of the financial strength of the Royal Navy: at no time in the period 1800-1814 did the French naval budget exceed two-thirds of the British. (The highest was 66.59% in 1804, when Napoleon was trying to re-arm during and immediately after the Peace of Amiens: thereafter it was all downhill – 37.5% in 1805 to 27.7% in 1813 – though the British budget in the years 1812-15 was inflated by the American war.) However, if the Treaty of Paris in 1814 had been negotiated with a strong French fleet in being, then the years of the *Pax Britannica* might have looked different. To that extent, if to no other, Trafalgar was decisive.

Irony is not usually a characteristic associated with the French, so his statement that “Cornwallis wasn’t a Nelson: he didn’t carry out a blockade from Lady Nelson’s bed, but stayed off Brest, without giving Ganteaume the smallest chance of a sortie” has perhaps rather a silly implication.

Other articles in the Trafalgar dossier include Collingwood’s despatch (in English), a dissertation on the British signals at Trafalgar, and an interesting article on a three-volume fictional saga, written by the late Françoise Linarès in the 1960s, covering the period 1790-1830, the third volume of which, *La Fleur et le Fusil*, contains an excellent factional account of the battle.

Another excellent article, by Étienne Taillemite, bears the title “Fault-line or continuity: the weight of the past on the officers of the Imperial Navy”. This examines, critically, the disastrous effect of the Revolution on *La Royale* (a term still used occasionally today for the French navy). Without doubt, the French navy acquitted itself well in the last years of the American War, even if perhaps Britain was not laid quite so low as some French historians suggest – it is instructive to see the importance attached to Suffren’s action off Porto Praya in April 1781, when he engaged Commodore Johnstone’s squadron in the Cape Verde Islands. In the annals of the Royal Navy, it was no more than a scuffle, but it is regarded by the French as a victory, though no ships were lost on either side, and the French casualties (according to Clowes) were 309, as against the total British casualties (in warships and East Indiamen) of 166. But the Revolution filled in the well of experience gained by France in the years 1778-1783, and the Revolutionary and Imperial navy suffered command failures at all levels, not helped by a lack of further experience enforced by the British blockades, maintained “with tenacity and perseverance”.

Of the non-Trafalgar articles, the editorial, by François Vallat is of particular interest today. Its title is “Towards a European Coastguard?” It opens by quoting *Lloyds List* for 07 February 2005: “... The members of the European parliament have convinced a hesitant Council of Ministers to accept the principle of a European Coastguard for the first time, despite warnings that the fusion of national coastguards could be dangerous. The European Commission has been invited to undertake a formal feasibility study, and to report before the end of next year.”

The article lists the tasks of such a coastguard: safety and rescue of all vessels in distress; air-sea rescue of personnel; policing professional and leisure maritime activities (to include supervision of traffic routing systems, and discharge of ballast, etc.); anti-pollution activities; assistance with major sea festivals (e.g., tall ships’ races); policing, and assistance to fisheries; all forms of maritime security: anti-smuggling (of people, ‘normal’ contraband,

drugs): anti-terrorism operations; military security in the littoral (protection of vital points – the entrance and anchorage at Brest are cited as examples): prevention of gun-running and of other weapons.

It will be seen that this, if pursued, will lead to the creation of a European force akin to the US Coast Guard, and would have considerable impact on the RN's current tasks, particularly in relation to Fishery Protection and the 'offshore tapestry' – a topic which was top of the pops some twenty years ago, but which doesn't get much mention today. And it is perhaps a mark of the article's French origin that there is no specific mention of the protection of off-shore oil and gas installations, though clearly these would be included.

The article's conclusion is that Europe isn't yet ready for such a force, and M. Vallat repeats his statement from *La Tribune* of 10 March 2005: "The idea of a European Coastguard is certainly attractive, but, it seems to me, Europe, which will be neither federal, nor even confederated, in the near future, is not yet ready to take on itself a community-wide system modelled on the USCG: equally, that is no reason to do nothing, nor is it an excuse for our coasts being any less well protected than the coast of the USA."

There is also a brief examination of the French defence budget and its naval component for 2005. The author, Amiral Alain Denis, confirms that French defence spending is increasing – not by much, but by more than the rate of inflation in the last two years (6% rise in two years, against 1.5% annual inflation). His opening remarks inspired a wry grin; that any happening (such as a budget) can be examined in an optimistic, or pessimistic light (the half-full, half-empty syndrome) or objectively, and objectivity in such a matter, he says, is as "rare as oxygen at high altitude".

Another article contains a description of a ceremony which took place in 1905, when the *Entente Cordiale* was marked by the presentation of a piece of *Victory's* oak to the Paris City Council, which gave it to the keeping of the *musée* Carnavalet, the Paris Museum. Over the course of a century, the relic has gone missing, probably during World War II, and so, thanks to a French naval historian, Henri Lachèze, and the Royal Naval Association (Aquitaine Branch), a further presentation of *Victory* timber was made last year to the *musée* Carnavalet. M. Lachèze records, more in sorrow than in anger, that the *musée de la Marine* in Paris, which was the first choice for the re-presentation, refused point-blank to accept the donation, as did the naval museum in Rochefort. He suggests that the reason was that the year in which the offer was made coincided with an exhibition whose theme was 'Napoleon and the Sea', and "it was no doubt preferable in certain eyes that the former adversaries should not meet face-to-face, lest the *Victory*, even in so modest a shape, should have cast a shadow over the Emperor, and Trafalgar outshine the sun of Austerlitz".

The last article which there is space to notice is one entitled "The Last Mission of the *Kursk*: to sink Putin". It is a diatribe against a polemical TV programme on the loss of the *Kursk*, broadcast on the French TV channel A2, which the author, Contre-amiral Camille Sellier describes as "a model of disinformation". The admiral is a submariner and had frequent contact with the Russian military and nuclear authorities, 1993-98, and so was able to follow the whole sad saga closely from start to finish, including the Russian enquiries. His condemnation of the programme shows (as if one didn't know) that (TV) journalists are the same the world over – playing on the fears of the man in the street, all the stronger for being irrational, as a part of a society in which defiance of authority is standard, and in which someone must always take the blame.

The annual subscription to *La Revue Maritime* is 55 Euros (£37.50) for a subscriber in the UK. It is suggested that it is well worth the price to open a window on the activities of the only other major European navy, with whom we are going to have to work, ever more closely, regardless of what we may now think of the politics of European integration.