

Naval Battles That Mattered

This is Bill Sena's budget. The topic is "Sailing". Bill will relate his many and interesting Caribbean experiences. Mark Upson, a lifetime sailing devotee, will then reenact verbally his exciting sailing adventure. Bill has asked me to begin our sailing journey.

My own sailing experience has been minimal, so in good sailing parlance I will "come about, hard a lee" to follow five historical naval encounters. I will catch the wind to these battles in my paper titled "Naval Battles That Mattered"

Four of the five battles were sailing battles other than the first, the Battle of Midway. Only six months after Pearl Harbor, characterized by Franklin Roosevelt as "the day of infamy" the U.S. fleet under Admiral Chester Nimitz soundly defeated the Japanese at the battle of Midway, June 3 to June 6, 1942.

The U.S. cryptologists had broken the Japanese code enabling our navy to track the exact location of every Japanese warship. Four of their six aircraft carriers were lost. Change was on its way.

Who was the Japanese commander? Isoroku Yamamoto. He had become the commander in chief of the entire Japanese Navy. Yamamoto had studied at Harvard University from 1919 to 1921. He became the Japanese Naval Attaché to Washington. He later wrote in his diary "I fear that all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve." Our often, then used slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor" helped awaken the U.S as this sleeping giant.

What subsequently happened to Admiral Yamamoto? On April 18th, 1943 U.S. cryptologists, still deliciously at work, discovered that Admiral Yamamoto would be flying to the Island of Bougainville.

Admiral Nimitz was alerted. He created Operation Vengeance, which authorized the tracing, tracking and shooting down of Admiral Yamamoto. Admiral Bull Halsey also received the notice. He responded, "Tally Ho, lets get the bastard."

Yamamoto was, per the continued code breaking, due to arrive by plane at Bougainville at 9:25 in the morning. U.S. P 38 Lightning fighters took off from Guadalcanal 400 miles away. At 9:24 and 30 seconds amazingly, the U.S. planes shot down and killed Yamamoto. Such precision. There was no equal.

The naval battle Midway and later Leyte Bay terminated the ability of the Japanese to retain its conquered territories. Heroshima and Nagasaki, while tragic, eliminated the terrible price of a Japanese mainland invasion. The world had truly changed.

Our second important battle, this time the sailing battle of the Chesapeake Bay, September 5, 1781, the thirteen colonies against the British. This naval victory against England led directly to the independence of the United States.

The British General, Cornwallis, had dug in at Yorktown waiting for large reinforcements to arrive by sea. General Washington had joined with the French forces of General Rochambeau. Together their superior force would have conquered Cornwallis unless British reinforcements arrived.

The naval battle aligned vessels of Admiral De Grasse our French ally against the awesome attacking British navy. Everything depended on the outcome of the naval battle. Luckily the British Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson was elsewhere.

Involved were sailing Ships of the Line, massive, gigantic gun- boats, with high masts, squared sails and complicated rigging resembling spider webs. They were armed with between 64 and 110 cannons mounted on tracks protected by doors, which were opened to aim and fire the cannons. These gunboats were 150 to 170 feet long often using three decks for firing their cannons.

It took ten men to clean, load, aim, trigger then fire a single cannon. A ship with 40 cannons on each side, needed ten men for each of the 40 facing guns, 400 men plus more men as reserves.

The warships usually lined up parallel, cannon facing cannon. The French had a preference for grapeshot at close range. This disabled the sails and rigging of the enemy making a target for boarding with swords and muskets. These battles were blood, bludgeons, guts and gore, followed by death in a red stained briny sea.

Admiral De Grasse delivered a stunning victory. No reinforcements arrived. Cornwallis surrendered. The naissance of our nation was game changing for the world.

Four years later on October 21st 1805 the western world again changed because of the Battle of Trafalgar, our third battle. Lord Horatio Nelson led the British navy against the French and the Spanish. His victory in this battle stopped the advancing of Napoleon Bonaparte. It saved England and established the boundaries of Europe. Bill Sena will later detail this battle in his paper.

Lord Nelson, although he had lost an arm in one battle and an eye in another was still the commanding master tactician. In place of paralleling the enemy he boldly sailed his entire fleet directly towards the French fleet. He splintered it into three smaller segments, which he then deftly demolished.

Nelson took a musket shot at close range, which eventually killed him. His famous phrase lives on and forever "England expects that every man will do his duty."

Going back in time to our fourth battle, the Christians were about to become subject to the Muslim faith of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1453 Constantinople was taken by the Ottoman's and renamed Istanbul. At the peak of their power they ruled most countries bordering the Mediterranean from Turkey, through Greece all the way to Macedonia and Arabia.

The Ottomans led the world in the arts, in science and in medicine, like inventing forceps, catheters and scalpels.

This the Battle of Lepanto was between the Ottomans and the Holy League of Pope Pius the Fifth. The Pope enrolled his own Papal States, and the Hapsburgs, Sicily, Naples, Venice, Genoa Savoy, Parma, Urbino, Tuscany and even the Knights of Malta. This was the highly powerful Holy League led by Don Juan of Austria.

He was the illegitimate son of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles the 5th. On October 7, 1571 the fleet of the Holy League with 1815 cannons met the Ottoman fleet with its total of 750 cannons.

Don Juan crashed his flagship the Real directly into the Sultan's flagship the Sultana. Armed men of the Real clamored over the rails of the Sultana, slaughtered with pike and sword then sunk her, to the bottom of the briny sea.

Don Juan of Austria was heralded in G. K. Chesterton's poem in part as follows:

“And the Pope has cast his arms abroad for agony and loss,
And called the kings of Christendom for swords about the cross.
The cold Queen of England is looking in the glass;
The shadow of the Valois is yawning at the Mass.”
Europe for the moment was saved.

Many, many years earlier about 450 BCE,, Before the Christian Era our fifth meaningful battle, was between the east and the west, the Battle of Salamis.

Darius, the King of Persia and then his son Xerxes had conquered everything from India through Pakistan all the way to Macedonia. Xerxes was about to attack Athens but first his forces had to cross the straits of Salamis.

Fortunately, the Greeks were led by one extraordinary statesman Themistocles. He had a plan. He persuaded the Greeks to abandon Athens to avoid defeat by the far superior forces of Xerxes, who really wanted Athenian slaves and not a hollow victory.

Xerxes decided to challenge the Greeks in a sea battle. He put his ships into the narrow straits of Salamis. The warships of the Persians were large, heavy and difficult to row. Greek ships were light, smaller and maneuverable.

The Persians had been up the entire night getting their ships into the straits. Under the tutelage of Themistocles the Greeks accomplished a stunning victory.

Although the Persians did come back to fight another day the Greeks developed one of the world's greatest societies, the Golden Age of Pericles, the Golden Age of western civilization. This naval battle enabled Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to bring wisdom to the world.

Today naval battles may well have been replaced by cyber battles but, will civilization continue its inexorable change? Who knows and for better or for worse?

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